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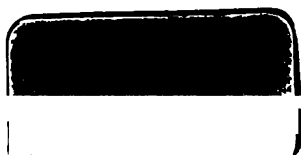
ROOKSTONE

By the author of
"PATTY"





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ROOKSTONE.

ROOKSTONE.

A *Novel*.

BY
THE AUTHOR OF "WILD AS A HAWK,"
"HESTER KIRTON," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
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ROOKSTONE.

CHAPTER I.

ROOKSTONE PARK.

THERE always had been Wolferstons at Rookstone Park. There had never been any notability in the family, or any marrying among the young folk for position or title, but for old blood and unspotted fame you might search England over and find no family purer or truer than the Wolferstons.

The present squire had succeeded his maternal grandfather in the property, and

as the estate had been carefully managed during his long minority, he found himself a richer man than many of his more immediate predecessors.

It seemed so far that Christopher Wolferston's lot in life was a singularly happy one. He had married, when very young, the woman he loved ; he had two charming daughters, both nearly grown up, and about eight years ago his dearest wish had been fulfilled by the birth of a son and heir.

A good landlord and a most tender husband and father, all his friends and neighbours said that the owner of Rookstone deserved this unceasing tide of prosperity, he made such good use of it. He might be slightly vacillating, a little inclined to act on impulse, but he had done much for

the welfare of others. His village schools were the best built and endowed in the county, and lately he had been planning the erection of almshouses for old and impoverished folk belonging to the neighbourhood.

This afternoon he and his wife were looking over some drawings which had been sent in by the builder.

“Won’t you put Kitty Robbins in one of the almshouses?” said Mrs. Wolferston.

“Old Kitty! Why, Amy, I believe it would break her heart if I turned her out of the lodge. No, I’ll do this if you like; I’ll make the lodge and the garden it stands in, her own as long as she lives, so that in case my life drops before hers, and Christy takes a dislike to her, she may be safe.”

“Christopher ! how could Kitty outlive you ? she must be sixty-five at least.”

“ Well, I think she’s older. She had a grown-up daughter who died when I was a child ; but then these sort of women are grown-up when they are sixteen, and I believe Kitty wasn’t older than that herself when she married. But I think we owe the old woman something for the devotion she has always shown to us, though she is such an old crab.”

Mrs. Wolferston laughed. “ Is she ? She is eccentric and rather proud in her ways, but she is always civil to me and the girls.”

“ You should hear Richard’s opinion of her. I expect he won’t approve of this gift of mine.”

A cloud came over his wife’s sweet face, and she sighed.

“ I sometimes wish Richard had stayed in America.”

“ Why do you wish that, Amy ?”

Mrs. Wolferston looked at her husband. There was almost a mischievous smile on his happy, genial mouth, and it puzzled her. It was painful to her even to allude to a matter on which she did not think as he did, for something told her that he had guessed the cause of her perplexity, and made light of it.

She got up from her chair, and, going to her husband, put her arms round his neck.

“ I believe you know my reason already, Christopher. It is for Mary’s sake I shrink from Richard.”

Mr. Wolferston took her hand, but he still smiled in the same easy, amused fashion.

“ Why should you shrink from him, if

Mary does not ? I think she likes Richard. Now, don't sigh, Amy ; do you know that I shall think her very lucky if he does care about her ?”

“He loves her, I am sure of it—but Mary is such a child still, not seventeen, remember. I think—”

She paused to gather courage, for what she had yet to say was an effort.

“What do you think, my pet ?” he said, kindly, for he saw the struggle in her face.

“I think that if you were to invite Richard less often to Rookstone, Mary and he might scarcely ever meet ; and if this were managed carefully she would soon forget any slight impression he may have made on her fancy.”

“And Richard ? You have no regard for his feelings, then, supposing them to be

what you suspect. You women only think of your own side of the question, Amy. Remember you were but eighteen yourself when you married, and Janet was younger when she engaged herself to Wenlock."

"I had better be quite candid, for I know you guess my reason, although you will not perhaps see its force as I do. I would rather have Mary made unhappy even by this separation than see her married to Richard. When he arrived in England you told me that his strange free-thinking notions were merely the result of his colonial habits—that he had often lived so cut off from human beings, that he had grown careless about the outward forms of life. I made allowance for all this, and waited. But more than a year has gone by, darling, and I see no change—he still

takes every opportunity of scoffing at what he calls cant. Honestly, I often wonder at the sympathy you seem to find with a man so totally unlike yourself, so unlike any Wolferstons that I ever heard of."

She had made her husband look grave at last, and gravity was a very rare expression on his pleasant handsome face; there was regret, too. His wife's words had awakened a sharp feeling of self-reproach.

"Well, my pet, I take some blame on my own shoulders," he said, after a short silence. "Perhaps, if I had spoken to Richard he might have been led to think of things more seriously. But, my darling, you must remember that he has had no advantages—his mother was an Italian, a singer, I believe. What should I have been without your

influence, Amy, and why may we not hope that Mary will do as much for Richard?"

His wife protested against this view of the case. Mary was so young and childish that Richard would be far more likely to mould her to his own opinions and habits.

"If it were Janet, it would be quite different," she said.

"Well, well"—the gravity of the conversation had exhausted his patience—"we won't discuss it any longer, dearest. Mary is, of course, too young to marry at present. But I think you are prejudiced, and we owe a far heavier debt than you are aware of to Richard. I wish now I had told you of it before, but I never knew quite the right story until he came over to England, and then he asked me to keep it quiet, so as not to revive the remembrance of his

father's disgrace. I think you ought to know it, though, and if I get the opportunity I shall ask him to-night to release me from my promise of secresy."

"I did not know you expected him."

"Yes; I forgot to tell you. He is coming down on business." He looked at his watch. "In fact, I thought he would have been here by this time."

CHAPTER II.


RICHARD WOLFERSTON.

THE sun was setting as Richard Wolferston passed through the gate beside the keeper's lodge. The red may-tree in the little garden served as a focus for "last gleams;" it was intensely crimson in its full-blossomed beauty. But, once through the gates, the tall trees intercepted the level sunlight, and the day looked at least an hour darker. The candelabra-like blossoms on the horse-chestnuts stood out almost ghastly against their now sombre leaves.

The gate clicked in shutting, and the keeper's mother, old Kitty Robbins, came out into the little garden, and looked after the visitor with a frown on her wrinkled brown face. "I wish ye'd never come this way—I don't trust ye," she muttered, as she went back into the lodge.

Farther on was a large clearing where several of the grassed rides that intersected the park met, some of them dark alleys full of mysterious shadow. Along that which ran westward the light still glinted, spangling the leaves here and there, and those so specially singled out, burned with intense radiance.

Richard Wolferston's pale face glowed too as the distant light travelled to it, and the unusual tinge gave him a look of fire and energy. His ordinary expression



was languid, almost indolent. He was a well-grown, handsome man, with singularly large, dark, dreamy eyes—these seemed to flash back the red western light angrily, and then he looked round at the stately growth of trees.

He was thinking deeply as he made his way through the park, silent now except for the occasional cry of the nightjar or the sheep-bell's monotonous tinkle, or perhaps the whirr of a stag-beetle almost in his face. His thoughts went on in this fashion : —“ Another long minority—nothing would surprise me less ; young Christopher cannot be more than eight years old, and his father—well, I imagine Christopher to be about forty ; but the Wolferstons never make old bones. To think that all this may lie waste for years !”


He sighed, and then walked on impatiently.

Near the house the trees were no longer in dense masses, they stood in twos and threes, well chosen both for form and colour, and grouped harmoniously in the foreground of the picture, which the distant country offered from the windows. It was a long, low house, with two widely stretching wings. Along the centre ran a terrace, with grey, worn stone balustrades on a red wall. On this, as Richard approached, two peacocks stood, stiff as if carved and then painted to imitate life. But when he reached the flower-garden beneath the terrace, one of the birds flew away, with its shrill, ungainly scream, and the other soon followed, dropping a feather almost at his feet.

The sun had sunk quite out of sight, even the red memory of him had been replaced by the exquisite chrysolite hue one only sees at that hour—a time which speaks of peace and rest, soothing the perturbed soul by its infinite solemnity, and bidding the wearied body rejoice that the close of outdoor labour is come.

Richard Wolferston stood a minute gazing at the soft green sky, then he turned and mounted the steps. He had recovered all his easy indifference, and sauntered on towards the open windows of the saloon, balancing the peacock's feather on his finger. He had often seen the room before, and yet he stood looking in before he entered, with keen admiration. Richard Wolferston loved the beautiful in nature and in art, but he preferred it in the latter ;

and there was so much in the arrangement of this sitting-room of Mrs. Wolferston's to give pleasure to the eye, that it would have been wonderful if he had taken no heed of it. The saloon, as it was called, was a long room stretching almost the length of the terrace, with a huge fire-place at each end ; a double row of four marble columns supported the two centre beams, wide enough apart to make another little room between them. All along the walls ran soft-cushioned divans covered with some dark blue woollen texture, and mounted in black carved wood, evidently Indian by its lightness and grotesque perforations. The walls showed a few choice pictures, chiefly in water-colours. But it was nothing in detail that caught Richard Wolferston's eye. It was the harmonious grouping of



fresh flowers in simple crystal vases beside antique bronzes, of a straw work-basket on the table at the farther end of the saloon, with the cabinet of cameos close by, and the étagère, filled with Chelsea and Dresden and Sèvres and Limoges, and here and there a rare, highly-prized specimen of Henri Deux porcelain. The Chelsea Venuses and the bronze bulls were equally at home in that pleasant, well-stored saloon—so well-stored that you might have spent more than one day in it before you had discovered all that it contained to delight eyes and heart alike.

He tapped playfully at the window, and went in.

There was a likeness between the cousins as they shook hands—a likeness of features, but not of complexion, for Christopher was

fair-haired, and his eyes were more brown than black ; the one face, too, although it showed the same indolence as the other, had not a trace of discontent.

“ I had almost given you up, Dick,” said Mrs. Wolferston.

“ The train was late, and I loitered coming through the park. How are you ? ”

This last to Mrs. Wolferston. Though she was his cousin's wife, he had not yet learned to call her by her name. He liked her—better, perhaps, than he usually liked people, for he was cynical about the good qualities of others—but he seemed never to attain the intimate footing at Rookstone which would have set him quite at ease with its mistress. Looking at the sweet fragile face, it seemed impossible that a loving heart did not belong to Amy Wol-


ferston ; but Richard had begun to doubt this after a year's acquaintance ; and Mrs. Wolferston's greeting was so cold this evening that it was a relief when his cousin asked Richard to come into his writing-room.

Mrs. Wolferston sat some time after the gentlemen had left her, perplexed and anxious. Putting the objection she had urged against Richard on one side, she had another cause for anxiety. Mr. Painson, the old family lawyer, had taken offence, about two months ago, at the deference the squire of Rookstone showed to his new-found cousin's opinion, and had begged him to seek another adviser. Mrs. Wolferston knew that her husband secretly regretted this estrangement, and also that he thought his cousin had been haughty and unconciliating in the tone he had

taken in differing from Mr. Painson. The cause of quarrel had been a mere trifle—the most advantageous way of leasing some farms which Mr. Wolferston had recently added to his property.

Richard Wolferston had been brought up to the law, and when Mr. Painson sent in his resignation, the squire placed his papers and affairs in his cousin's keeping.

“I suppose Christopher is right, and I am prejudiced,” Amy Wolferston said to herself; “Richard must be quite thirty-five, old enough to manage business, if he is ever to manage it; clever, too, and certainly a person one feels inclined to like and consult, and yet I feel as if the property was no longer so safe under his management as with dear old Mr. Painson;



he was often cross and fidgety, and not half so agreeable as Richard is ; but I wish he were still Christopher's adviser."

She went to the window that opened on to the terrace. There in the distance were her three children—Mary and Christopher running races, Janet walking slowly some little way behind. The sight cleared away Mrs. Wolferston's perplexity.


"What is coming to me," she said, "that I should begin to doubt or despond? Surely no woman was ever so blessed as I am, with such a husband and such children ; and why should I fear, for Christopher is better and wiser in every way than I am? Even if this foreboding that weighs on my spirits be a presage of evil, no efforts of mine can ward it off. I am forgetting the very precept I teach my children, that all

vexations and troubles, however small, are sent us."

She passed out on to the terrace to meet the group. They were close to the spot where Richard had stooped to pick up the peacock's feather—Mary, a tall, lovely girl, with her father's fair hair and soft, sweet brown eyes, was flushed and panting from her heedless racing, and little Christy's cherub face was scarlet, and his golden curls all disordered.

"My dear children, how you have heated yourselves!" said their mother; "come in and keep quiet, Mary."

"Tell us something first, do, please." Christy had got both hands clasped round his mother's arm, and was squeezing it with a mixture of affection and eagerness that compelled her to stop and listen.



“Is Richard here, darling? Mary declared she saw him go up the terrace steps as we stood among the trees there, below the lake.”

Mrs. Wolferston glanced involuntarily at her youngest daughter. She had been standing quite still, and yet the flush on her cheeks had deepened. Her mother sighed; she turned to Christy—“Yes, Richard has just come, but you cannot go to him, he is in the study engaged on business with papa.”

“I know, I know; it’s a secret, but I know what it’s about,” and the wild little fellow let go his mother’s arm, and ran round and round her in his glee.

“Hush, Christy,” said Janet, “you are talking nonsense about a secret. You ought not to repeat anything you hear papa say by chance.”

Janet Wolferston was scarcely nineteen, but she had quite the manner and the authority of a much older person with her brother and sister. Strangers called her strong-minded and eccentric, but her mother, although she might sometimes regret the sternness of her eldest child's rebukes, respected the motive which she knew prompted them. Janet had never been so great a favourite with her father as either Mary or Christy, and thus had escaped the systematic spoiling they received at his hands. Reproof was intolerable to Mr. Wolferston's facile, sweet temper, and he found it pleasanter and easier to yield entirely to these young wills than to thwart them. Janet was not so tall as her sister, and was unlike either of her parents in appearance. Her hair and

complexion were neither fair nor dark, though the latter had the bloom of Hebe ; her eyes were bright and large, and of the darkest blue. Richard Wolferston said they were the eyes of a Diana, and the severe aquiline profile and firmly-cut lips confirmed this idea at first sight, though Janet Wolferston was not cold-looking ; but Richard had taken a dislike to her from the beginning, and he encouraged little Christy in mutinous behaviour to his elder sister.

“ You are very clever, Janet,” the child said, mischievously, “ but you don’t know a bit what I mean.”

“ Hush, Christy,” his mother began ; but he was hugging her arm again, and holding his fair flushed face up to be kissed.

“ It’s only this,” he said, too low for any

one but his mother to hear ; “ Richard has come to-day to do something to papa’s will. I heard them settling it just before he went away. I only said it was a secret to tease Janet, for they both knew I was close by, and papa took no notice.”



CHAPTER III.

RICHARD WOLFERSTON TAKES OFFENCE.

A WEEK had gone by, and the subject of Richard Wolferston's visits at Rookstone had not been mentioned between the husband and wife. It was such a very rare circumstance for Mrs. Wolferston to differ from her husband, that she felt it must be a long time before she could get courage to renew the discussion.

She was sitting by herself, her husband was out riding with his daughter, and Richard Wolferston was announced. He

thought her manner more formal than ever, and it irritated him. Buffeting with the world may brace a man's energies, but it seldom sweetens his temper, and Richard Wolferston had had a hard struggle ever since boyhood to gratify his extravagant tastes, or keep himself even near the position he wished to fill.

He asked for the girls, and Mrs. Wolferston's cold, almost indifferent answer stung him beyond endurance. His pale face flushed. "I am afraid, Mrs. Wolferston, I have been so unfortunate as to offend you, or that I am no longer welcome at Rookstone."

He laid a stress on the name, to remind her of his claim of kindred.

She flushed too, but she did not answer at once. It seemed to her that as he had

given her this opening, it might be well to speak frankly to him about Mary. The impulse was strong, and she yielded to it.

“You have not offended me, but you are right in thinking that I do not welcome you to Rookstone.”

“I scarcely understand such a nice distinction.”

“Shall I be quite frank with you, then? and if I offend you, will you believe that I do so without intention?”

He bowed, but he looked cynical. If Amy Wolferston had known how little belief he had in her sincerity at that moment, she would not have been so confiding.

“It seems to me”—she stopped, and then went on hurriedly, plunging into

what was so difficult to approach by degrees—"that you admire our youngest daughter."

She looked at him; every trace of colour had left his face, but he made no attempt to answer her.

"She—she is very young, perhaps you do not know how young—she is not quite seventeen—in mind she is quite a child still"—she remembered Mary's blush, and she faltered—"I should be very sorry to have her otherwise for a year or two longer."

Still no answer, only his head rather more erect, and his lips tightly closed.

"Now you understand why—why—I may enjoy your society very much, and yet be unwilling to expose Mary to the risk of seeing you so constantly while you feel

as you do towards her. You have not contradicted me, therefore I venture to think I have guessed rightly. Girls of Mary's age are not as quickly won as when their feelings are more fully developed, but constant association would be painful and unsafe for both of you, and I really wish to save you pain, too, Mr. Wolferston."

"Thank you." He bowed deeply as he rose. "I give you credit for the best possible intentions"—his lip curled with scorn at what he considered her mercenary views—"and you are quite right, doubtless, in thinking Mary far too beautiful to throw away on a poor struggling lawyer. You have taught me my place, Mrs. Wolferston, and I thank you for the lesson. Poor relations, you know, are apt to forget themselves. I had meant to ask

your husband's permission to — to admire Mary, as you say ; now I will refrain."

His tone was so bitter that she saw he was deeply wounded. Before she had made up her mind how to answer him, he spoke again in his usual voice.

"I will wait in the study till Christopher comes in, I have something to do to the papers I have brought." He left the room.

Mrs. Wolferston felt very dissatisfied. It would have been better to tell Richard the true cause of her objection to him. She had let him go away under a false impression, but he was so very angry that explanation would probably have been useless.

She thought for some time longer, and

then decided to consult her husband, and ask his permission to write frankly and fully to Richard Wolferston. She feared that Christopher would disapprove her having broached the subject at all. She could give herself no reason for having spoken—it had been an irresistible impulse, and it had only made matters worse. It might keep Richard away from Rookstone, but it was very painful to feel that she had made an enemy of her husband's most intimate friend.

She must see Christopher before he met Richard. He would be sure to come in through the saloon, and she could tell him in a few words all that had happened.

If she could have known the mis-

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chief her words were working, she would at once have followed Richard Wolferston into the study, and have braved his anger.

CHAPTER IV.

FORESHADOWINGS.

THE door opened, and Mrs. Wolferton started up, but it was only Newman the butler.


“If you please, ma’am, old Kitty from the lodge has slipped down just now, coming into the court, and Mrs. Knight’s afraid she’s sprained her ankle.”

“Where is she?”

“In the housekeeper’s room, ma’am. Mrs. Knight thought you might quiet her,

perhaps, for the poor old creature will have it her leg's broken. She seems in awful pain."

"Poor thing!" and Kitty Robbin's sufferings put to flight all Mrs. Wolferston's anxieties. She was soon kneeling beside the old woman, and examining the injury.

"Now dwoant'ee, dwoant'ee touch I." Kitty pushed away the soft white hand with her brown, hard-working fingers. "For pity's sake, dwoant, Madam Wolferston; ee may be as soft as feathers, but feathers 'ud rasp, I know. Oh, dear! oh, dear! The ways o' Providence goes crook'd at times, I be a thinkin'. There'll be that gipsy hussy at the toll-house, as never does naught for her livin', with both her legs safe and sound, and no use for
 and here be I, with use enow for six,

clean robbed o' the best of 'em. Ah! it be no use talking. I know—I beant a fool—I hanna lived sixty years to be told and taught about my own bones and jints, Mrs. Knight."

This was in answer to the housekeeper's assurance that her bones were uninjured.

Mrs. Wolferston asked if the doctor had been sent for, and finding this had not been thought necessary, she gave orders that a messenger should at once be dispatched, for she saw that no meaner decision would have weight with Kitty.

"Tellin' I as it beant broke, ony twisted"—the old woman's indignation got loose as soon as the housekeeper had gone with her mistress's message—"when it yachs all the way up to the knee-jint. Weary me! there be folks as knows th' extent o' other

people's pains a deal better than th' extent o' thay appetites."

Mrs. Wolferston petted and soothed the poor old woman, and bid the house-keeper summon her again when the doctor came.

As Mrs. Wolferston crossed the hall on her way back to the saloon, she met Janet.

"Where is your father?"

"Richard's here, and papa is in the study with him."

Then she had lost her chance of speaking to her husband, and, having lost it, it would perhaps be better not to mention what had happened till after his cousin went away, for she guessed that she should scarcely see the squire for a minute before the dinner-bell rang. The little

interview with old Kitty had calmed her. She began to think that Richard Wolferston would see he had been unjust and hasty.

His manner at dinner-time puzzled her. There was an uneasy restlessness she had never before noticed in him. In answer to his cousin's invitation, he said he could not sleep at Rookstone, he had an early appointment in London.

"But you will get home in the middle of the night."

"Not quite so bad as that," he said, with a forced laugh. "A train leaves Purley station at ten ; I shall be safe in chambers by half-past one o'clock. But, I say, Christopher, we had better finish off that business to-night."

The two gentlemen spent the rest of the

evening in the study. The bell was rung more than once.

Mrs. Wolferston and her daughters were sitting in the library, a cozy room, walled, except on the window side, with oak book-cases. The very door was concealed by sham books, so that when it was closed a stranger might have looked vainly for means of egress.

Mrs. Wolferston was busy with needle-work, Janet was reading, and Mary, having idled away the first part of the evening in play with her favourite dog Loulou, discovered that she had left her embroidery in the saloon.

She came back with it, laughing.

“What can papa and Richard have to say to those two men? I saw John, the new groom, and that young gardener,

Kitty's nephew, going in to the study."

"Mary, how curious you are," said Janet, indignantly.

"People are sometimes wanted to write their names as witnesses, dear," said their mother; "and those are chosen who are the least interested in the papers they have to sign."

Ten o'clock struck, but the gentlemen did not come into the library.

"I suppose they will finish the evening there," Mary said, in a vexed tone.

Mrs. Wolferston rang the bell.

"If you please, ma'am, master said I was to tell you he had driven Mr. Richard over to the station, and he hoped you would not stay up for him," said the butler.

Mrs. Wolferston sent the girls off to

bed. She went up-stairs herself, but she could not stay there, she felt too restless.

The evening had been oppressive, and the saloon windows were still unclosed. She passed through the centre one on to the terrace. There was no moon, not even a star; the sky was almost awful in its vast darkness.

Just then the stable clock rang out eleven in a shrill, clanging tone, as if it was telling the household it ought to be in bed.

"I wonder what keeps Christopher," she thought; "it is only half an hour's drive from the station."

Still she paced up and down. A night-ingale, far off in the woods, began to trill out his marvellous gurgle of sweet sounds,

but they did not soothe her. Her hearing was so intently strained to catch the first sound of returning wheels, that even the nightingale's song came as an unwelcome distraction.

She had left the saloon in darkness, now she saw a light moving in it.

It was only Newman come to close the windows.

"You can leave the centre one open," said his mistress; "I can close that. I shall stay here till your master returns. Is he not very late?"

"Yes, ma'am, only this being the first of the month, we haven't got the new train-book yet, and Mr. Richard's train may go later now; and master would wait to see him off, ma'am."

This was said to soothe his mistress; the

man was himself growing anxious at the delay.

Speaking out one's fears often relieves them, and when Amy Wolferston stepped on the terrace again her heart felt less heavy.

How kind, and good, and unselfish her husband was. She believed that he had been at the trouble of driving his cousin over to Purley to please her. He would not press him to stay because she had asked him not to encourage Richard at Rookstone, and yet he would dismiss him so courteously that Richard could not take offence. Why should not his words come true—why should not his cousin be brought to a better, less worldly life, if Christopher bent his mind to the task of influencing him?

“Then I could give him Mary joyfully,” she said; “but I cannot believe it would be right to expose the child to Richard Wolferston’s influence in order that she might benefit him. It would be doing evil that good might come.”

Again a light in the saloon. She had not heard the wheels, but it might be her husband. The wind was rising among the trees, and amid the creaking and swaying of their giant arms other sounds were scarcely heard.

Newman came out on the terrace to speak to her before she reached the window. She could not see the man’s face, but there was a troubled sound in his voice.

“It’s more than half - past eleven now, ma’am. Should I go out along the Purley Road, and see if I can meet master?”

All the foreboding, all the nameless terror that had lately weighed on her, and which she had so bravely struggled with, thronged back suddenly as the man spoke.

“Yes, Newman, I shall go at once. I wish we had gone sooner. You and John can go with me, and let some of the other men follow us with lights.”

Before the butler had got back into the hall with a lantern, his mistress stood there, wrapped in a large cloak, the hood drawn over her head.

“You won’t go yourself, ma’am,” he said respectfully. “You’ll take cold, ma’am, and perhaps—”

“Open the door,” she said, in a more decided voice than he had ever heard from her. “You had better lead the way with your lantern, Newman, it is so dark.”

It was as dark as it could be—that impenetrable, immeasurable inkiness that makes one fearful where each footstep may lead. At another time Amy Wolferston would scarcely have dared to walk unguided in such blind fashion ; but now she hurried on, helped by the glimmer of the butler's lantern, a faint help against the dense gloom.

“ You have told the men to bring lights, have you not ? ” she said ; “ we can see nothing distinctly by this lantern.”

“ Yes, ma'am, there are some torches at the keeper's cottage, and I told them to wake up Jem Robbins, and bring him along.”

They had left the park behind them, and were in the high road leading to Purley.

“ What is this ? ” she exclaimed with a

half cry, as her arm struck against something hard which seemed to be in the middle of the road.

Newman raised the lantern.

“It’s the toll-gate,” said the other man who accompanied them. “Molly must know if the master’s passed through yet. Holloa, Molly! Molly, wake up, I say.”

They knocked long and vigorously before any signs of stirring were heard in the toll-house. At last an upper window was unclosed, an angry voice cried out—

“What d’ye mean by such a caddie at this time o’ night?”

“It’s me, Molly—Mrs. Wolferston. Has the master gone through the toll to-night?”

“Then be off wi’ ye, ye’re an impudent baggage; ye’ll not be tellin’ o’ I that a

real lady born, like madam at the park yonder, 'ud be comin' out in the high road 'twixt night and morning, rousin' honest folk from their lawful rest."

"Let me speak to her, ma'am," said Newman; "she's only half awake, and doesn't know what she's about. Look here, Molly, my girl, wake up, and look sharp, too. It's me, Newman, and the mistress. You remember the master driving by here in his new dog-cart this evening, rather before ten, don't you know, now?"

"And what then? The master have a right to go where he choose without folks a spyin' after he and his ways. It's like I should see whether a dog-cart's old or new, and the night so dark I can't see my own hand. It were the master, though, for he said, 'Good night, Molly.'"

"We're losing time," Mrs. Wolferston said, in an imploring, eager tone to Newman; "she can tell us nothing."

"And you're sure, Molly, he hasn't been back?"

"I shouldn't talk of his going if he'd come back too, should I, ye dunderhead?"

"Well, then, lend us your lantern, quick, like a good lass, for we're afraid something's gone wrong."

It was terrible to Mrs. Wolferston to hear her own sickening fear put into words as a certainty. She could not stand still while the sleepy, unwilling woman groped about for her lantern. She hurried on alone in the darkness, and feeling for the little swing gate, passed through it before Newman and John were ready to follow her.

CHAPTER V.

A DARK NIGHT'S WORK.

ON the other side of the gate, alone in the utter darkness, Amy's courage failed. What was this nameless horror that had come upon her? Christopher, her husband—it was impossible that anything should have happened to him.


“Christopher!” but her words seemed choked and muffled by the darkness—they fell back on her tongue and palsied it for a moment. The inner darkness was worse

than that without, and then her heart was lifted up from that crushing despair, and she clasped her hands together, and prayed for help and guidance in this her sore need.

As she turned to listen for her companions' footsteps, she saw the welcome sight of lights a little distance off; the men from the gamekeeper's cottage had made good speed, and would soon join them.

But Newman and John were through the gate. Molly's lantern gave a better light than their own, and they went on faster.

The two men whispered together every now and then, softly, but their mistress could not speak; she dared not even think; she was trying her utmost to keep calm and self-possessed, for a new dread had flashed into her mind.



Newman came up to her, even in that moment of fear and doubt touching his hat with his customary respect.

“I don’t see how there can be any accident, ma’am. If there’d been one, the horse and dog-cart would have come home, unless—”

He was surprised at his mistress’s calm answer.


“You are thinking Mr. Wolferston has taken the lower road from the station, by the mill-pond. I think so, too. We had better stand still till the men join us, for we must be getting near the angle where the roads separate. As soon as they come up, make them light all the torches, then let John and a couple of them go to the station along the regular road, the others can follow you and me.”

The man repeated her orders mechanically as the rest joined them a few minutes afterwards. The mill-pond!—a thought, so Newman said to himself, to make a man feel sick and giddy, much less a delicate woman like his mistress.

It was a large deep pool, encroaching far on the road, which was specially narrow at this spot, as the footpath was raised several feet above its level.

“Surely, although it is so much the nearest way, the squire would not have run such a risk on such a night as this is. Suppose he’s gone to town with Mr. Richard after all. He certainly said mistress was not to wait up for him; and yet he never did a thing like this before.”

Mrs. Wolferston still kept at the head of the party. The next turn of the road she



thought must bring them to the mill-pond, but in the darkness she felt uncertain.

Suddenly she called out in a high unnatural voice,—

“Torches! bring them forward here.”

She could not have told why she uttered that cry; she could not have described the chill horror that came with it; but it was no sudden shock or terror when the red smoky glare shed a broad light round the spot on which she stood, to see a dark form stretched across her very path, and to know before she looked that the white upturned face was her husband's.

The red glare reflected brightly in the deep quiet water of the pond. It was close beside its edge that the squire had fallen. His wife knelt down quickly beside him, and loosened his collar; then she bent

down her ear to listen, but all was still. She kissed his forehead gently, as if she feared to wake him. Till now she had acted as we act in a dream—moved and acted without sense or feeling ; but the icy chill that met her lips pierced through the stupor that had benumbed her ; she gave a deep gasping sob, and sank down beside her husband.

While Newman was busy sending men off in different directions for the doctor, for the means of conveying the squire's body and his almost lifeless wife to the park, some of the others were searching for the missing horse and dog-cart. The last was soon found on the farther side of the pond, more than half under water, and broken, but of the horse there were no traces—none, at least, discoverable in the darkness.

He might be lying at the bottom of the pond, strangled in his attempts to free himself, or he might be rushing wildly about the country, maddened by the terror he had undergone.



CHAPTER VI.

MR. WOLFERSTON'S WILL.

NEXT morning the sun came streaming in through the windows as if nothing had happened over-night to make his presence unwelcome at Rookstone.

The blinds had been drawn down, but still the bright light forced its way in—into the bedroom upstairs, where Mary lay sobbing hysterically on her bed, deaf to Janet's tender soothing words, and entreaties to calm herself for their dear mother's

sake ; into the nursery, where little Christopher sat, his cherub face stiffened to an unnatural seriousness, more at the solemn stillness that reigned everywhere than because he as yet realised his loss.

But it was in the death-chamber below that the warm cheerful sunbeams were most unwelcome. The master of Rookstone had been borne into a seldom-used room leading off from the entrance-hall, called the small library, and here his wife had taken her place beside him. Janet had stolen in once or twice during the night, but she felt that her mother's sorrow was too sacred to be intruded on. It had come upon the loving wife with such a sudden sharpness that she could not believe in it. With her head bent slightly, listening as intently as she had listened the night

before for the carriage wheels, Amy Wolferston sat, almost as still as the rigid form beside her, except that every now and then she gently raised the covering Janet had placed over the face of the dead. Then the wistful yearning of her sad eyes told that all hope was not over within her.

But as the day wore on hope fled, and at last, when Janet came and urged her to take some rest, she yielded, and suffered herself to be led away. Even then she said, softly,—

“You will not leave him, darling. We could not leave him alone.”

At her room door she saw little Christopher seated on the mat. He jumped up and ran to her.

“Nurse says I am to keep away from you, darling, am I? You want your own

little Chris, don't you, poor, pretty mamma?"

As the little arms clung fondly round her, the forced calm gave way. She buried her face among the child's golden curls, and wept passionately; then she drew him into her room, and, closing the door, she clasped him in her arms with a vehemence which startled him, it was so unlike his sweet gentle mother.

But the relief to pent-up feeling did her good. When Janet came to her, about two hours later, alarmed by Christopher's terrified account of the way "mamma cried," she found her with swollen eyelids, sadly worn and exhausted, but more really calm and resigned than she could have expected.

Next morning it seemed to Janet that

her mother had grown years older. She had dressed herself in black ; her beautiful hair was strained completely away from her face, and gathered in a simple knot behind.

And Amy Wolferston felt years older. It seemed to her as if she had lost half of herself, the moving spring of her life, the sun which had cheered and lighted her every thought and action. But she did not give way to sullen or uncontrolled sorrow.

Sorrow she must. While the wound was still so acute, there was no use in trying to heal it ; but she strove humbly and patiently to see God's hand in it, and not to rebel. Meanwhile Mary resisted all Janet's attempts to tranquillize her.

“ You have no feeling, Janet ; strong-

minded women never have, and they think others give way, just because they have deeper feelings. If you had loved darling papa as I did"—and here the poor child burst into a fresh fit of sobbing, and flung herself on her bed, resolved not to be comforted.

Janet had borne up bravely, and she had striven hard to keep the knowledge of Mary's state from her mother, but on this second day Mrs. Wolferston asked for her, and her sister was obliged to tell the truth.

Mrs. Wolferston put little Christopher off her lap, and went to her daughter's room. Mary lay on the bed, still sobbing.

Her mother wept with her at first, and then reasoned; but when she found that

Mary made no effort at self-control, she grew anxious.

"My dear child," she said, "do you think your father is pleased that you give way to such violent grief? Little Christopher said to me just now, 'I must be always good, mamma, for you know he can always see me now, and he used not to when I was in the nursery.'" But Mary was only quieted for a moment; she soon burst into vehement sobbing.

It was strange to see the different effect that this trial had on the two sisters.

On the quick-tempered, energetic Janet it seemed to have laid a softening, chastening hand. Her gentleness with all was wonderful, and her tenderness tried to save her mother even the trouble of thinking for herself. The slight erect figure glided

noiselessly about the house, giving directions and transacting business that might have been thought too serious for her age. On Mary, the sunbeam of the family, the bright lovely darling who had cheered all hearts by her saucy winning ways, the effect had been entirely opposite. She alternated between long desponding fits of silence and sudden bursts of forced cheerfulness, which usually ended in hysterical sobs.

Poor Janet—in the midst of her sorrow came what a week ago would have been hailed as a special joy, a letter from her betrothed husband, Captain Wenlock, to announce the return of his regiment from Malta. He had been away for more than a year, and Mr. Wolferston had promised that directly he returned the marriage

should take place. Now, such a thought was mockery. She crushed the letter into her pocket, feeling as if the very gladness its contents had filled her with were a robbery from the sorrow due to the dear father just taken to his rest.

The same post, too, brought her mother a letter from Richard Wolferston—a formal letter of condolence, and an offer of service if he could in any way be of use to his dear cousin's wife and children.

Janet opened it, and grew thoughtful as she read.

"I do not like to worry, dear mother," she said, "and yet I must. My father's will must be read. I wonder if Mr. Painson has it, or whether it was transferred to Richard."

Janet wrote at once to Mr. Painson and

asked the question before she spoke to her mother.

The answer came promptly. Mr. Painson regretted that he had no longer any claim to advise Mrs. Wolferston legally, although as a friend he would always be entirely at her disposal. It was a very kind, warm letter, contrasted with Richard's, and something in the difference between the two struck Janet painfully.

She gave both letters to her mother.

Mrs. Wolferston read them attentively, but she made no comment, except to tell Janet that she wished both Mr. Painson and their cousin to be present at the funeral.

The day came, and with it that fearfully sharp wrench, almost like the severance of body and spirit, when the loved


one is really taken from our mortal eyes for ever. Janet and little Christopher followed their father to the grave, and returned home soothed and comforted.

Janet came to her mother's room.

"I am not going to stay with you, dearest." She kissed her fondly as she spoke. "Mr. Painson wishes me to be present when the will is read. Will Mary come too, or will she stay with you?"

To her surprise, Mary rose up briskly, and said she would accompany her, but as she reached the door she looked back at her mother.

There was a plaintive, beseeching tenderness in Mrs. Wolferston's face, doubly plaintive in the mournful cap she wore for the first time, that recalled her wayward



daughter's straying thoughts. Mary left Janet abruptly, and sat down again beside her mother.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Wolferston had any very near relations. Mrs. Dawson, a sister of the late squire's father, and Mr. and Mrs. Webb, the last a cousin of Mrs. Wolferston, the doctor, the clergyman, Mr. Painson, and Richard Wolferston, and another person, a stranger—these were all the group that Janet found collected in the dining-room.

They seemed to have been waiting for her.

Kind Aunt Dawson came forward, and made Janet sit between herself and Mrs. Webb ; then there was some little earnest talk between Mr. Painson and Richard Wolferston, who stood half hidden in the

deep bay window ; and then the stranger, whom Richard named to Mr. Painson as one of his clerks, seated himself before a desk, and began to read.

Janet tried to listen and to understand, but she could not. After the first few words all sounded like a confused jargon, belonging to some far-off period of language rather than the present. Exactly opposite to her as she sat was a portrait of her father painted at the time of his marriage, and as she gazed on the fair handsome face, with its winsome smile and open fearless eyes, the memory of her loss grew painfully present, she with difficulty restrained her tears—all outward sights and sounds were obliterated.

Her own love for Captain Wenlock—for though her reserve made her chary of speaking of him, she loved him with all

the strength of her nature—gave Janet some estimate of the agony her mother suffered, and the contemplation of the long widowed years that might be yet in store for this darling mother was almost more than she could bear. It was terrible to sit there, racked with such sorrow, with the outward consciousness that it must be restrained and kept within bounds.

It seemed as if the clerk's monotonous voice had been reading on for hours, when it suddenly stopped. There was a confused murmur of voices, some speaking with vehement disapproval. Mrs. Webb's was the loudest.

"It's shameful, and there's no other word for it; after being such a wife, too, as no man ever had before, I do say it comes very near a fraud. Not but what I

always thought poor dear Christopher inclined to be selfish."

Selfish ! her father selfish !

Janet looked up quickly, but she saw Aunt Dawson quieting Mrs. Webb, and she sat still and tried to understand the cause of this commotion.

Mr. Painson stepped forward and begged for silence. He looked severely at Mrs. Webb ; he was scandalised at such a breach of decorum.

The clerk went drawling on, and Janet tried to listen. She could not quite understand, but it seemed to her that Richard Wolferston's name came in continually. A few words at the close forced themselves upon her attention :—"Therefore, as the estate, if entailed, must have belonged to the said Richard Wolferston

years ago, and has only been alienated from him by a prejudice arising from no fault of his, I am hereby by this restitution merely doing the part of an honest man to him and his heirs, and relieving mine from the burden of unjust possession."

Then the paper concluded formally, and the clerk handed it to Mr. Painson.

There was a dead silence. Janet was conscious that something utterly unexpected had happened, that some new misfortune had fallen on her mother; but before she could in any way collect her thoughts Mr. Painson came up to her with the will in his hand.

"You and I, Miss Janet, will go to mamma now; the sooner this news is broken to her the better."


She took his arm passively, but directly

she found herself alone with him in the gallery outside her mother's room, she stopped.

"I can't quite make it out." She passed her hand across her forehead, as if to clear away the confusion from her brain. "Why did Mrs. Webb call dear papa selfish, and why did every one look so angrily at Richard Wolferston?"

Mr. Painsong pulled up his shirt collar stiffly. He had flattered himself that Janet had shown an early promise of developing excellent business powers; it was mortifying that an affair simple enough for the comprehension of a baby had puzzled her.

"Why, my dear child, it lies in a nutshell. Your father, in what—don't look shocked, Miss Janet—even I must call an




unwarrantable fit of conscientiousness, has willed Rookstone and all its appurtenances to Richard Wolferston as heir-at-law, and left your mother £400 a year for her life, with succession of said £400 to Christopher, and to you each £100 a year. I must say, my dear, that it's fairly monstrous ; it will take me some time to get over. Now, shall we go in to your poor dear mamma ?"

CHAPTER VII.

MR. PAINSON'S STORY.

"I WAS prepared for something unexpected in my dear friend's disposal of his property," Mr. Painson said, when he had communicated the contents of her husband's will to Mrs. Wolferston. "Before I got Miss Janet's note, Mr. Richard Wolferston had written to ask me to be present to-day, as he said his cousin had made a different will from his former one." The old lawyer checked himself.



Mary's eyes were fixed on him with a strange intensity, and he began to consider whether the presence of so many listeners was desirable. He was a bachelor, a cautious as well as a nervous man, and he had a very hazy belief in the trustworthiness of any woman—always excepting his favourite Janet, whom he had petted from her childhood. But as he could not well make a difference between the sisters, he said he thought what he had to say had better be told to their mother only.

Janet rose at once, and looked at her sister, but Mary lingered; she felt that what Mr. Painson had to tell was in some way connected with Richard Wolferston, and she longed to stay and defend him from any blame which might be laid to his charge.

“You can go to Aunt Dawson and Cousin Louisa, dears,” Mrs. Wolferston said. “After what Mr. Painson has just told me, I think I will not attempt to see them to-day ; will you give them my love, and ask them to excuse me?”

As soon as the girls left the room, she turned to Mr. Painson. “This news surprises me, of course, but still not so much as I dare say you expect. Only a short time ago he—my darling husband—spoke of restitution due to his cousin. We were interrupted, and he did not fully explain himself. I remember he said he had promised to keep the matter a secret, but I am sure he meant to have told me his intentions — if — if this had not happened.”

She tried to be calm, but it was very

difficult to speak of her lost one without emotion. She went on, presently, "You can do me a great service, Mr. Painson, if you will. You can caution Mrs. Webb, especially, that no one must venture to disapprove of this disposal of Rookstone—to me, I mean. Mrs. Webb means well, but there are times when well-meaning people can do a great deal of harm." She spoke with dignity. She wished the old lawyer to understand that this prohibition extended to him also.

He bowed; he was lost in wonder, partly reverent, partly pitying, for he thought, in her extreme duty to her husband, this perfect wife was forgetting the claims of her children.

"May I ask you a few questions?" he said; "I want specially to know when the

conversation you mention took place : can you remember the exact day ?”

She thought a minute.

“Yes ; it was the 25th of May. I remember the day well, because Richard Wolferston came down on business.”

“Ah !” The old lawyer’s brows knit ; he had never conquered his vexation at the breach that had occurred between the late squire of Rookstone and himself. “May I ask if my dear friend had seen his cousin when he told you this ?”

“No ; he was sitting in the saloon with me, expecting him. It was his arrival, in fact, that broke off the conversation I spoke of.”

“And when Mr. Richard left, did you renew it ?”


“No ; he stayed till next morning, and

—” She paused, and a faint colour stole over her pale face. She could not say she had forgotten it, for she knew that during those few happy days that followed, she had studiously avoided any topic which would lead to the mention of her husband’s cousin, in her tender shrinking from a revival of the former discussion.

Mr. Painson’s practised eye saw that she was keeping something from him : but it was not his way with women to face a perplexity openly ; he considered them subtle creatures, and therefore took them, if he could, at unawares.

“ You must forgive me, my dear lady, if I seem to give you needless pain, but from your applying to me as you did, immediately after this distressing calamity, I imagine that you have some wish to rely

on my advice?" She only bowed, and he went on, not looking at her. His green-grey eyes had a trick of wandering about nervously, as if they could find nothing satisfactory to rest on. "Now I want you to try and concentrate your memory on the occurrences of the last few weeks, and having done so, to tell me whether you have not seen a difference in your husband's manner—a flightiness, perhaps,—or a despondency, or a restlessness, or an irritability, which might have shown you, if you had been less blinded by—by natural affection, that—Stay, my dear lady, you promised to hear me out," for Mrs. Wolferston tried eagerly to interrupt him—"I say, which might have shown you that his intellect was — was — you must forgive me—clouded—not quite sound, in fact."



He touched his forehead to point his meaning, but Mrs. Wolferston had risen, and stood looking at him with pained surprise.


“I see what you mean, Mr. Painson, and I must tell you that you are very wrong even to hint such a suspicion. Do you think me so regardless of my boy’s future as to suppose that I could take his inheritance quietly, if I thought his father had not really willed it?—for if his mind had been affected, I consider the act would not have been his own.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Painson, meekly—her outbreak had been more vehement than he expected, and he had as great a dread of a woman’s wrath as some folks have of cold water—“but you led me into this supposition yourself.”

"I? Mr. Painson?" She looked confounded.

"Yes ; just now, when you spoke of Richard Wolferston, your manner was so confused and hesitating that you irresistibly led me to the conclusion that he had unduly influenced your husband in the disposal of his property, and that you had combated such a disposition ; and knowing the nature of my dear friend's feelings for you as I did, I could not fancy this influence being used successfully against yours, had Mr. Wolferston's mind not been previously warped."

For a moment his manœuvre had nearly succeeded. In her anxiety to establish the soundness of her husband's intellect, she was on the point of betraying the secret of their discussion and of her own dispute



with his cousin ; but Amy Wolferston had been trained early to set a watch on her words. Perhaps the very dispute I have mentioned was one of the few occasions when this habit had been neglected, and the bitter remembrance it had left, that on her last day of married life she had acted in opposition to what she knew were her husband's wishes, served to keep her watchful over her words now. The bitterness was doubled, because, as we know, she had been obliged to keep the matter from her husband.

“ My uneasiness arose from quite another cause,” she said, quietly—“ a cause which could not in any way affect your present inquiry.”

She spoke, as she thought, the truth, and yet if she had then told Mr. Painson all

that had really happened, he might have read his old friend's strange will through a different pair of spectacles.

"There is something I should like explained more clearly," she said; "you understand that I entirely accept this disposition of his property as Mr. Wolferston's deliberate wish; but I want quite to understand the nature of his cousin's claim."

Again Mr. Painson inveighed mentally against the dulness of womankind—for was not the whole claim of kindred fairly stated in the will he had just read to her?

"Richard Wolferston"—he pulled up his shirt-collar and spoke in his most impressive manner, knocking off the different items of his statement with his raised forefinger—"is the son of his father, Charles Wolferston; and Charles Wolfer-



ston was the son of Christopher Wolferston, the late squire's grandfather and predecessor at Rookstone. You know—or it is quite possible you don't know, for such extraordinary pains were taken to keep the matter quiet, that I don't believe there are above a couple of people left, besides myself, who remember the story—that the old squire had only these two children—Janet, the eldest, your husband's mother; and this boy Charles. Charles was intended for the army: he went to Eton first—there he was soon rusticated; and at Oxford he got worse and worse. He was about the wildest young fellow you can imagine. I fancy the old squire was too indulgent at first, and then desperately hard when he found he had been deceived. The mother had died young, you see, and

Janet had married and was living abroad with her husband : so there was no one always at hand to say a good word for the poor young scoundrel—for he was a scoundrel to deceive his father as he did. I did what I could. I was the junior in the firm that then managed the Rookstone property ; but Charles contrived to blind me too.


“ His father paid all his debts, as he supposed ; purchased him a commission, and made him a handsome allowance ; and the first news he got of his son was that he was arrested for about three times the amount he had just relieved him from. Even then he did not quite give him up. He insisted on his leaving the army and taking to a more hard-working life ; for he detested the extravagance which he might have brought into. He went into a well-known

banker's : it was difficult enough to get him in, but his antecedents had been kept so quiet that it was generally believed he had sold out because his regiment was ordered abroad and he could not get an exchange—" Mr. Painson stopped abruptly, and looked searchingly at the pale earnest face. He had got warmed with his subject, and it seemed to him that, circumstanced as his friend's widow was with Richard Wolferston, she ought to know his whole history, "Now comes a fact"—he spoke in a low cautious tone—"which I can only mention in the strictest possible confidence. My dear late friend must have been aware of it, and it was this, no doubt, which he intended to communicate to you as soon as his cousin released him from his promise of secrecy. It is said in the will that Christo-

pher Wolferston, your husband's grandfather, disinherited his only son Charles in favour of his daughter Janet, then the wife of Sir Gordon Dawson, that the said Janet had become a widow before the news of her brother's disinheritance reached her ; that when she returned here to Rookstone after her husband's demise, bringing her boy Christopher with her, the old squire took legal measures to change his name to Wolferston—but of course you knew about this change of name before."

"Ah! yes; I have heard it from old Aunt Dawson; she calls herself Mrs., but, as you know, she is the maiden sister of my husband's father."

"Yes, yes, she could tell you that, and she, no doubt, thought the young scapegrace Charles Wolferston rightly served for



his extravagance and his unfortunate marriage, for he went over to Paris and got married to an opera singer there ; but he was not disinherited on those counts, before then something had happened which broke the old man's heart—he lived some years afterwards, but he never held up his head again. This is what did it. One day one of the partners of the firm in which Charles had been placed came down to Rookstone—“You will not breathe this even to your daughter Janet?”

“No,” she answered. She shrank from the story of another person's guilt ; but the thought of Mary made her determine to know all that was to be known of Richard Wolferston.

“Charles Wolferston had forged a cheque for £5,000 on the bank in the name of one

of the partners. Happily for him, the fraud had been discovered at once, and therefore was easily concealed. The firm behaved nobly : the only compensation they demanded was that the culprit should leave England and pledge himself not to return for a term of years, I forget the precise time ; however, he died in California before the expiration of it, when his son, this very Richard, was about nine years old. I believe he still receives the allowance the old squire made to his cast-off son ; but this was all managed so secretly that your husband knew nothing of his cousin's existence even, until he received a letter from Richard himself announcing his return to England, rather more than a year ago."

"Then no one knows anything about Richard Wolferston's previous life?"

“I have never met with any one who knows anything about him ; but, my dear friend, if you will permit me to call you so, I have not many acquaintances, and none of them have ever lived in Australia or California.”

CHAPTER VIII.

MARY'S CONFESSION.

THE son of a felon !—for although not convicted in a court of justice, what else had Charles Wolferston been?—and this was the man who loved Mary, and for whom she feared Mary had more than mere cousinly liking.

Long after Mr. Painson left her, Mrs. Wolferston sat thinking in her dressing-room, tortured with the feeling that she must risk her daughter's safety or her hap-

piness. On one point she would not let her thoughts rest—her husband's incaution in admitting his cousin to intimacy with his children on such short acquaintance. The excuse for this was Richard's irresistible charm of manner—a charm which she acknowledged spite of her disapproval of his principles; a charm which seemed to have subjugated all the inhabitants of Rookstone except Janet and old Kitty Robbins.

For the present the shock of Mr. Painson's story had dulled the remembrance that Rookstone was no longer a home for her and her children, but after a while this came back. It was so very hard to go away—to leave this first and only home of her wedded happiness—to go where she should have nothing to remind her of her

husband ; but a mind so raised above earthly things as Amy Wolferston's was soon restored from this trial of its peace.

“ What am I lamenting over ? ” she said ;
“ I, the half of whose life has already passed away. How much worse it is for these young ones, just at the time when they were entering on all the pleasures and amusements their position entitled them to enjoy ! How shall I comfort them, and win them to be resigned, if I am myself rebellious ? ”

She spoke to both her daughters next morning. She found Janet silent, unwilling to enter on the subject of the will ; she got up and left the room when her mother turned to Mary.

Mary's eyes were round with surprise.

“ But, mamma, why need we go ? Richard

does not wish it. How could he? He would not grieve you for the world ; I am sure he would not."

"How can you be sure, Mary?"

The beautiful girl blushed at the grave question, but she crept up to her mother a minute afterwards and put both her arms round her.

"He told me so himself yesterday, when Janet took me away from you and that hateful old man."

"Hush, my darling."

"Well, I must hate him, for I know he tries to set you against Richard, just because Richard's so clever and knows better than he does how to manage dear papa's business. When we got down-stairs Richard was in the hall. I don't know what became of Janet. Just then I was very angry,

because I thought, as you do, that he—Richard, I mean—was a usurper, and was driving you away from your rightful home.”

“What else could you think?”

“Well, we are both wrong, darling mamma.” She kissed her mother again, as if she would conquer the incredulity she read in her eyes. “Richard was so surprised and shocked when I said it that it was impossible to think he had ever contemplated driving us away. He told me that he and Mr. Painson had been appointed joint guardians of Christy, and he said this is a plain proof that dear papa never meant us to leave Rookstone.”

Mrs. Wolferston drew her daughter's hands into her own, and holding them there, looked at her steadily.

“My dear Mary, you are not quite a

child ; try and consider this question as if you had no interest in it. Would your father have made his cousin master of Rookstone during my lifetime if he had intended me to remain here ?”

“ Ah, but that is just the point Richard made so clear to me. He said dearest papa had suffered from a scruple of conscience ever since he had known that his uncle Charles had left a son, and it was only to quiet this scruple that Richard yielded to the will being in its present form ; for, as he says, he was only ten years younger than papa when the will was made, and he thought his life the worst of the two. Even if the property had been left to you, some one must have managed it for you. Why cannot you stay here, dearest, and consider him as only the manager ? You will

make him and all of us happy by doing this."

Mary spoke eagerly, with flushed cheeks and imploring eyes.

"My darling, listen. I know what Richard does not. Before your father made this will he was thoroughly aware that I wished to break off our intimacy with Richard. Stop, Mary, and hear my reasons." The impetuous girl pulled both hands away from her mother, and hid her face between them. "It is not possible, therefore, that he could have intended us to live together; it would be an insult towards him to judge him so wanting in tenderness towards me. You are fond of Richard. It is quite natural; he is your cousin, and has been very kind both to you and Christy; but, Mary, Richard

is not a good companion for either of you."

The flushed face looked up, half angry, half tearful, the rosy pouting lip drooping doubtfully.

"I do not blame him, for he has had no home teaching which could help him, and much foreign residence rarely improves a man. I do not think, my darling, you could be long content with a friend who mocks at all religious ordinances as Richard does."

"Ah, but, mamma, are we not told not to judge others, and may not he be thoroughly good, although he gives less outward signs of it than others do?"

Mrs. Wolferston trembled. It seemed to her that the evil influence had gone deep with Mary already.

“I am no bigot, Mary,” she said ; “I hold that love and truth in the heart must be pleasing to God, but I also think that he has always shown in all ages, that he wills mankind to give him some outward form of worship, and I cannot believe that anything but Self-Will in its deadliest form refuses this act of public homage and thanksgiving.”

The flush faded from the girl's face—faded to an almost deathlike whiteness ; her hands fell idly in her lap.

“Mamma !”—the words were rather sobbed than spoken—“if I may not trust Richard, take me away from Rookstone. I could never stay with him and not—” She buried her face on her mother's shoulder.

Mrs. Wolferston saw how deep the


wound was, and shrank from probing it ;
but she saw, too, that she must not
remain one day longer than was needful at
Rookstone.

CHAPTER IX.

A CHANGE OF PLANS.

BUT matters will not always arrange themselves as we wish.

On the morning after the reading of the will the widow received a letter from the new master of Rookstone. In it he repeated all that Mary had already told her. He begged her not to remember, but to pardon, the hasty and uncourteous words he had spoken on the evening of his last visit. He would not attempt to deny his love for Mary, but if Mrs. Wolferston



thought his presence at Rookstone undesirable, he would remain in London, and only visit her when she required his advice, or when his presence might be wanted on the estate. If she would treat him as a brother, as one whom her husband had loved and believed in, he would be satisfied to wait, and hope that her mind might change about Mary.

Mrs. Wolferston showed this letter to Janet. She had been so accustomed to carry every thought and every wish to her husband, that she could not resist the comfort Janet's firm mind and single-hearted view of things gave her. Janet read the letter very slowly. The cloud of gloom that had settled on her face since the reading of the will had not left it.

"I am almost sorry you consulted me,

mother," she said ; " I feel I take a selfish view of the whole matter, and so cannot judge fairly."

" I think we must judge equally on one point, dearest—that Richard Wolferston is disposed to act generously and delicately towards us."

" That is just the point on which I suppose my mind is warped," Janet said, bitterly. She stood still a moment, thinking. " Mother, if one has a suspicion, a dreadful, terrible doubt about another person, and one knows at the same time that one's own motives are interested in cherishing this suspicion, how should one act ?"

She had taken one of her mother's hands as she spoke, and was grasping it with painful tightness, while she looked searchingly in her mother's face.

“ You are excited, my darling ; you have been overwrought these last few days, and your mind mistakes fancies for convictions. Try to turn your thoughts to something else.”

She bent forward and kissed Janet's forehead, lined slightly already with traces of thought, but the girl still looked restless and unquiet.

“ You don't quite understand me, mother ; would it be wrong to tell you what my suspicion is ?”

“ Try to conquer it instead ; if you cannot do that, then I suppose I must hear it ; but I could only do this for your sake, Janet, and I believe if you take the means I suggest you will not find it necessary to consult me.”

Janet turned away. The world had

indeed changed if her own darling mother refused to listen to her confidence. What had come to her? She seemed quite to have forgotten how this change of fortune had ruined her eldest child's hopes of happiness. When Janet had been promised to Henry Wenlock she was the daughter of the rich Mr. Wolferston, of Rookstone; her lover could not now be expected to keep faith with her in such a different position. If her mother would only have listened to her, she would have asked her advice, but this check threw her back into silence; "for the future I must lean on myself alone," she said.

Mrs. Wolferston watched her anxiously. She did not guess that distress and anxiety had brought disease to aid them, and that under the pressure Janet's mind was fast becoming no longer under her own control.

In the evening Mr. Painson came down from London to take Mrs. Wolferston's instructions. He was surprised to find her in such haste to leave Rookstone ; and he tried to dissuade her, but her resolution was not to be altered.

He returned to town early next morning, promising that by the end of a week he would have a small house ready for their reception in one of the London suburbs. Mrs. Wolferston thought, on Christopher's account, it would be desirable to give up a country life.

It had been arranged that the day before they left Rookstone, Richard Wolferston should come down and be formally put in possession by Mr. Painson. The latter had objected to this, as exposing the widow to unnecessary pain ; but Mrs. Wolferston

expressed a wish to see her husband's cousin once more at Rookstone before she left it.

On the morning of his expected arrival Janet did not appear at breakfast, and when her mother went to her room she found her so ill that all thoughts of a journey were postponed; the country doctor was summoned, and he told Mrs. Wolferston that the case was so serious she had better telegraph for further advice. Richard Wolferston and Mr. Painson reached Rookstone in the evening, and they learned that the London physician, who had just preceded them, pronounced that there was decided pressure on the brain, and that the slightest excitement might augment this to brain fever.

CHAPTER X.

THE WAVERLEY AVENUE.

FOR several days Janet lay between life and death. Her mother never left her. Mary wished to stay with her mother and share her anxious watchings, but Mrs. Wolferston would not even allow her to enter the sick room. "It can do no good," she said, "and the sudden sight of a fresh face may cause the excitement the doctor dreads."

In her utter absorption for Janet, Mrs. Wolferston did not ask whether Richard

still remained at Rookstone. She had warned Mary against him. She knew that Mr. Painson, in his anxiety for Janet, would be frequently at Rookstone ; she could only trust that all would be ordered for the best.

Mary came downstairs disconsolately when her mother forbade her to enter Janet's bedroom. She was sure Richard did not intend to leave Rookstone. She had heard him arranging plans with Mr. Painson which must occupy several days. How then could she avoid seeing and speaking to her cousin ?

"I wish mamma would have had me with her," she said. "I want to obey her advice strictly, and yet I seem to be put into the way of temptation."

She strolled out on the terrace. Christy

was teasing the peacocks, making them fly so as to shake out their feathers. He said :

“ I want to make a fan for mamma. Richard won't mind my having these, though I suppose they are all his now.” His joyous face looked serious, and the little fellow sighed.

“ You poor, dear little thing !” Mary stooped and kissed him. “ If it were only the feathers, we would not mind who took them from us.”

“ Now, that's where girls know nothing. I just should mind anybody taking my particular own feathers which I've always had to play with. Look, here comes Richard. I say, let us go and ask him if— if I mayn't have them.”

Here was one of the temptations Mary dreaded.

“No, Chris dear, come this way. I’ll show you such a lovely squirrel in that old oak in the copse-bit. Won’t you come? Very well, then, I shall go alone.”

She saw Richard hastening towards them. If he joined her, she should forget all her good resolutions. She turned away and left the terrace.

Richard Wolferston bit his lips; he could not mistake Mary’s action. She had waited till he came almost within speaking distance, and then had pointedly avoided him. Christy ran up to him.

“I say, Cousin Richard, do you mind my taking these feathers?”

“Where is Mary gone?” his cousin asked.

“She said she was going to look at a squirrel, but she never thought about

going till I told her you were coming. Why"—he looked earnestly in his cousin's face—"you are quite red, Richard ; don't be angry with Mary ; I'll go and tell her you want her, if you like."

"Don't be a little fool"—Richard spoke savagely, and caught his young cousin by the shoulder. "Who said I wanted her?"

The boy made no attempt to struggle. He was so utterly surprised that for a moment his busy little tongue was silenced.

He had been Richard's pet and playmate, and he thought his cousin must be joking. A glance at his frowning forehead and compressed lips taught him his mistake, and rousing himself, he tried to shake off the rough grasp on his arm.

“Let me go, you never dared speak so to me when papa was alive,” said the fearless child, his blue eyes looking as stern as Janet’s. “You need not be afraid I shall fetch Mary. No, I am not going to tell tales of you”—for he saw a change in his cousin’s face, and with childlike quickness of perception, interpreted it rightly. “I shall leave her to find out for herself how cross you can be. Janet was right after all.”

Something in the words affected Richard. He let the child go, and walked into the house—“Janet was right after all!”

He had gone into the study, and he sat deliberately down in his dead cousin’s high-backed chair to think out the child’s meaning.

“But I am a fool to worry myself about the nonsense of a baby like Christy” —he got up and moved towards the door —“I did not need to be told that Janet dislikes me ; because I would not submit to her proud and interfering spirit. Neither she nor her mother have ever shown me due courtesy. Why should I hesitate to plead my own cause with Mary? The only advocate I had with her is gone now. Poor Christopher ! I suppose few people would believe how heartily I wish him back again. That sanctified wife of his will be civil to me to serve her own purposes, but she will leave no stone unturned to keep Mary from me—for what else was she hurrying away with her from Rookstone? She must have poisoned the dear little thing’s

mind to some purpose, too, for her to avoid me as she did just now."


He stopped with his hand on the lock of the door. Had he been deceiving himself all this time? And was Mary really indifferent to him? "I was never deceived in a woman yet," he said, "and such a nature as hers cannot be misunderstood. She's a sweet, loving, yielding child at present; but no doubt her puritanical mother has infused a strong ingredient of duty, which is another name for prejudice. Let her do her worst; I defy Mrs. Wolferston herself to rob me of Mary if I am determined to win her"—he smiled proudly—"but I don't see why the poor little darling should go through any mental torture on the subject. I said I would not attempt to win her affections;

but that was on condition that Mrs. Wolferston accepted my terms ; she has not. Mary's manner tells me that her mother has not remained passive in the matter ; the poor child has plainly been told to avoid me. Look to yourself, Mrs. Wolferston ; you have taken the first step. By all means. I follow your example."

There was a bright, eager light in his eyes as he crossed the saloon. Christy was lying on one of the divans playing with Loulou. The sight of the dog made Richard doubt for a moment whether Mary was not nearer than he imagined, but he did not choose to ask any more questions. It was in one way a comfort to have offended Christy, there was no danger that the child would follow him. The left-hand boundary of the lawn which

stretched out at the foot of the terrace was a long range of conservatory. Beyond this the ground sloped gently to the entrance of a long alley, or rather avenue, of lofty elm-trees; the avenue itself was narrow, so that the meeting branches overhead took the form of an acutely-pointed Gothic arch, filled just now with the tender green atmosphere of "leafy June." Here and there were seats almost hidden behind the massive tree trunks, and rather more in front, full of exquisite light and shade as stray sunbeams glinted down on them from between the leaves, were quaintly-sculptured, greystone statues, representing characters from the *Waverley* novels.

Richard looked down this cool inviting vista, but there was no trace of Mary. At



its farther end, however, he saw the small iron gate open. He knew that this led to the flower-garden. He believed that Mary had retraced her steps from the copse-bit, and would be found here. Love's instincts are usually to be trusted, and with all Richard Wolferston's errors his love for Mary was true, and so far as his lights guided him, unselfish.

“I wonder where my grandfather picked up these quaint old bits of stonework,” he said, looking at Ivanhoe, spear in hand, with the blank shield of the Disinherited Knight; “one would fancy they must have been new when he put them here, and yet they bear all the traces of antiquity. Exposure to the weather, and the constant drip from the trees, I suppose, eats away the surface of the stone.” He

hurried on past Rob Roy, in his bonnet and kilt, past the Lowland-garbed bent figure of Old Mortality, almost past a stout, stalwart man-at-arms, no other than that dear friend of boyhood, Dugald Dalgetty, but he stopped here suddenly.

Out of sight, screened on one side by the square block on which the figure stood, and by a huge elm trunk on the other, safely sheltered in the deep cool shadow, Mary lay on the grass, seemingly asleep. She looked so very lovely lying there ; her fair hair, half escaping from the black riband that tied it, harmonised so perfectly with the green shadow, spangled with golden flecks and sparkling down between the leaves to rest on the virginal head at the foot of the stone pedestal. Her hat lay beside her, half filled with wild roses—it

was plain she had been to the copse-bit.

But Mary was not sleeping. Richard had walked on the turf, which reached on either side as far as the wire fence, dividing the avenue from the park, and she had not heard his footsteps. While he still stood gazing with exquisite pleasure at the picture she made lying there beside the grim old soldier, she started up and suddenly faced him. A look of terror and then of uneasiness clouded her lovely face.

He did not attempt to take her hand ; he spoke in his gentlest voice ; he saw that she must be soothed if he would have her listen to him.

“ I have been looking for you,” he said.

Mary blushed and hesitated ; then she raised her eyes fearlessly : “ I must go to

dear mamma. Do you know Janet is in a very anxious state?"

She spoke with a coldness that might have checked his ardour, but Richard Wolferston was too practised a man of the world not to read this innocent young girl rightly—rightly, that is to say, because they loved each other, for fearless innocence will sometimes prove a hard enigma to mere worldliness, without the help of that sure sympathy which unlocks all hearts.

"Yes, the doctor told me so, it is very sad, I have been looking for you ever since." He stopped to see if her attention was gained, but she glanced furtively along the avenue, as if she still meditated flight. "After what Mr. Bannocks told me, I felt anxious to see your mother"—this was true; he was returning to the house with this in-

tention, when the sight of Mary on the terrace put everything else out of his head —“ but perhaps it may be as well to send her a message through you.”

Mary's face was fully turned towards him now ; her self-distrust was lulled to sleep— there could be no harm in speaking to him about anything that might be important to dear suffering Janet.

But Richard did not mean his interview to end under the elm-trees.

CHAPTER XI.

A WARNING.

“THE doctor said”—as he spoke he walked slowly on towards the little iron gate at the farther end of the avenue, and Mary found herself obliged to follow—“that he thinks your sister’s illness will be a tedious one, but that he does not consider her symptoms dangerous ; his anxiety seems to be quite as active on your mother’s account.”

He saw the little start of fear, and he



felt that she drew nearer in her eagerness to listen.

“After all that has lately happened, Mrs. Wolferston will be unable to bear the fatigue of such continued nursing. The doctor says that your maid Thomson is also a very delicate person. Now, my dear child, will it not be better to send to London for a professional nurse at once? Only tell me what you wish, and I will go to town myself, and choose a desirable person.”

The tears were coming so fast that she hung down her head to hide them. This was the man her mother and Janet had thought selfish. She had heard that sudden prosperity tested men more truly than sudden adversity. This was only the second time she had talked with him alone

since the reading of the will, and how full of nobleness and generosity she had found him !

He was growing impatient for her to speak, but he was too wise to hurry her. The avenue was walled in from the flower garden by a tall yew hedge on either side of the gate, and over this was an arch of rose-trees ; on the right, lying back beyond the gate, was a small bower covered also with clustering roses. The very spot for lovers.

Richard had remembered this pleasant resting-place, when he found Mary beside the old statue, and with the prompt decision and iron will which, when united, enable men to rule others at their pleasure, he had resolved that the story of his love should be spoken here.

When they reached the gate, he

opened it and held it for her to pass through.

“Well!” he said, at last, for she stood still and silent. “What do you think of my plan?”

“I don’t know how to thank you—you are so very kind; but I am afraid dear mamma would not like any stranger to go near Janet; perhaps if I ask her again, she might let me help her.”

“She will not do that,” he answered. He meant that he should not consent to such a risk for Mary. “But is there no poor woman among the cottagers used to illness? I thought every village had its wise woman.”

Mary stood thinking. “There is Kitty Robbins,” she said, at last. “She is a cross old woman, and never cares what she says,

but I believe she is a very good nurse ; only I am afraid she is still lame from an accident."

"Sit down a few minutes and rest while you think some of the people over. That Kitty looks a perfect old hag ; I can't fancy your mother would like her."

He went into the bower, and she followed him and seated herself on the low bench which ran round it. Richard remained standing, his gaze fixed on her drooping eyes.

"I can't think of any one else," she said ; "but had I not better go at once to mamma, and ask her if she wants anybody ?"

"Listen, Mary. You must try to rely on yourself, and spare her the trouble and worry of judging ; her life may depend on it." He

took her hand, and in her trembling anxiety she was too much overwrought to withdraw it. "The doctor made no 'if' about it; he said, 'Mrs. Wolferston's health will give way.' What use is there in consulting your mother? she is much too good to disobey the doctor. If you cannot think of some villager, I believe I ought to secure a nurse from London as soon as possible."

"If Kitty is not still lame, I know mamma would rather have her than a stranger; I remember when we all had measles she sent for her to help nurse us, and dear papa was fond of her."

"Very well, so be it," Richard said, with an impatient sigh—he was glad to get the subject disposed of, and yet he had a special dislike to Kitty Robbins.

"We will walk over to the lodge and

see her ; and now, Mary"—seating himself beside her—"I want to know how I have been so unfortunate as to offend you."

"You have not offended me." In her surprise at his sudden accusation she forgot her resolutions, and looked at him with the old sweet frankness.

"You are sure I have not?—you don't know how happy you have made me ; but I want you to make me still happier—to promise me that you never will be offended with me, but will let me do all I can to show my love for you."

She tried to draw away her hand, but he held it firmly. "Mary," he said, softly—the tone stirred her young heart with a wild throb it had never before felt—"I want you to love me, not only as your cousin, but as a friend who will give all

his life to serve you. I want you to promise to be my friend too—to cling to me, let who will try and prejudice you against me, for I have no friend but you, Mary.”


But the promise did not come as easily as he expected. At first she refused resolutely to resume her former tone of intimacy with him, without consulting her mother.

Then he put forth his great powers of pleasing to gain his point, and his real love for her helped him. He urged upon her the cruelty of distracting her mother's thoughts from Janet, and, at the same time, the torture she inflicted on him by any doubt of her feelings towards him. Duty struggled for a time, but his tender words and looks were not to be resisted. Before Mary left the bower she had confessed to Richard that she loved him better than any one else in the world,

and she had promised never to avoid his presence, or to believe evil of him.

“There is much about me, Mary,”—he drew her fondly towards him—fondly, but gently, for he felt the little fluttering heart’s terror—“which I will explain to you some day ; now I am content to be misunderstood, because I am too proud to justify myself ; but I am not afraid of you, Mary—I trust you fully ; you have all my happiness in your keeping now. You know as little what that is as you do of my love for you. Come, my own darling, shall we go to Kitty Robbins ?”

That walk through the park was like a delicious dream to Mary. Recollections of her mother’s warning words came back and troubled her joy, but she soon chased them away.



Richard had said that no one understood him—and, under the spell of his dark eyes, she could not disbelieve—it was a spell that had magic in it. Mary seemed drawn to him by an irresistible influence, and yet she feared him: she knew she dared not disobey him, even at the risk of her mother's anger.

They were just in sight of the cottage, when Richard stopped. "I shall wait for you here, my own; I don't like that old woman; she will most probably make me angry."

Kitty Robbins was in the garden watering her flowers when Mary lifted the latch of the little gate.

"Good evening, Kitty; I'm so glad to see you about again; then your ankle was not sprained really?"

"If 'ee means there wur any sham about

it, Muss Mary, ye be altogether wrong ; my fut wur strained and bruised enough for six, and there be folks as 'ud be sittin' still now, a cryin' over it, but Kitty bean't one o' thay as frets over spilt milk."

Mary smiled, for Kitty had the reputation of a professed grumbler. "Well, Kitty, I daresay it was very painful, and I'm glad it is better. Are you well enough to come up and help mamma nurse Janet?" And then came the explanation of the doctor's fears.


While she listened, Kitty stood looking across the park. "I'll come up t' the house," she said abruptly. "But Muss Mary, what be ye doin' wi' that cousin o' yourn? If madam knowed what I do, it's not a young pretty piece of innocence as 'ee be as she'd trust to be slathered over

with all the flattering lies he puts he's tongue to—"

"Silence, Kitty!" Mary's eyes flashed with indignation. "Is that the way you speak of your new landlord?"

"Landlord! bless ye, child, why your dear good papa made over this cottage to I for life. What have a landlord to do wi' I? and it's not zackly of heself I wur thinkin'; he be a stranger hereabouts, 'ee knaws. Muss Mary, for your life's sake dwoant 'ee love he, dwoant 'ee trust he, dwoant 'ee marry he. There be bad blood in he and his'n. Bide a wee, miss, and listen." The old woman's manner had changed from its usual cynical snarl to one of earnest warning. Mary was impelled to listen, against her will. "I had a darter once, a rare pretty gal, not like you, may

be, for she's eyes wur as dark as the new squire's and she's hair to match ; but all for that her wur a beauty, and as good as gould. Your grandmother, Lady Dawson, tuk a deal o' notice o' Minnie, and for all of it her wur that modest and sweet, making no account o' sheself. Well, Master Charles, that wur the father o' your—" she jerked her thumb towards the way by which Mary had come—"him never left my gal in peace till him made she say she loved he. I dwoant say him meant real harm by she. Him knowed hur had been bred wi' a good name to uphold ; but, Muss Mary, I dwoant think neither (as hur did, poor soul!) as him meant to marry she. Him just found he's time heavy on his hands when t' old squire kep' he fro' Lunnon, and my Minnie lightened it. I wur at Staple Cross nussing, and Jem's father wur too



great a gowk to keep the young man fro' coming to the Lodge more oft than a should ha' comed, if I'd been to home."

"But you said just now, no harm happened to Minnie," Mary said, doubtfully.


"I said, muss, no harm come to she's good name ; none could ha' come to my Minnie ; but if e'er a man killed a young girl in cold blood, that wur Charles Wolferston. Him taught the poor lass to love he better than all the world beside, and him went away from Rookstone wi'out so much as a look or a token."

"Ah, but that might not have been his own fault."

"Come, now, dwoant turn me agen 'ee, too, dwoant 'ee now, Muss Mary. I tell ye," she went on, fiercely, "him wur married a few weeks after ; him only cared to look at Minnie's sweet face till he'd some-

thing else to pleasure he. He broke her heart, that wur bad enow, for she never held up she's head after she heard the news; and do 'ee think, Muss Mary, it wur right to set a modest girl up to be talked of, as him did, by running after she for ever. He wur a wicked raskil, and he had a mother's curse. A poor girl, Muss Mary, may be as good as gould, but hur mun keep to her likes if hur will na make gossip and evil speech about she. I telled ye this o' purpose for a warning; ye may guess Kitty dwoant go bragging easily o' her darter's sorrow. The new squire comes o' a bad father, and a bad mother too, I b'lieve. Dwoant 'ee love he, neither trust he. He'll bring 'ee to bitter sorrow if 'ee do."

She turned her back abruptly on the frightened girl, and disappeared into the cottage.



CHAPTER XII.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

MRS. WOLFERSTON was glad to accept Kitty's help, and after a day or two of anxiety a change for the better took place in Janet. Even the doctor, although loth to lose his patient, was obliged to say he thought she might be moved in a week.

Mr. Painson was to quit Rookstone that day, and Mrs. Wolferston sent for him before he started to tell him the good

and then he went to prepare the new
apartment for the reception of an invalid.

He then took her hand to him as he
went to her dressing-room.

"Will you see me walking about London
to-morrow," she said, brightly. "I am
gladly to begin our new life in the
little house you wrote to mamma

to let me have. Before he went away he had settled
with Mrs. Wolferston that, if the amend-
ment in Janet continued, they were to
take possession of their new abode that
very week.

"If I don't find Miss Mary in the sa-
loon," the old gentleman said, as he reached
the door, "will you make my best respects
to her, and my apologies for scant cere-
mony?"



“I will send for her. Kitty”—Mrs. Wolferston called the old woman out of her bed-room—“will you tell Miss Mary I want her?”

Kitty gave a sarcastic smile, and limped towards the door.

“I won’t trouble Mrs. Robbins,” said the lawyer. “Perhaps I may find Miss Mary with Mr. Richard. I must see him before I start.”

Kitty turned round with a grin.

“That ’ee will, sir, if ’ee looks sharp. I saw ’em go down the statty walk together as close as peas, as I wur standing t’ end o’ long gallery.”

Mrs. Wolferston turned so very white that even the busy old man, full of his deeds and plans, saw there was something amiss.

He stood looking at her.


She forced a smile. "I am not very well," she said. "Will you kindly send Mary to me when you have said good-bye to her?"

He bowed and went away.

Janet's pale face flushed crimson. "Kitty," she said, sharply, "are you sure you saw Miss Mary just now?"

The keen-eyed old woman knew that her words had made what she would have termed "a caddle." She had no actual dislike to Mary, but she took a secret pleasure in revenging herself for the indifference paid to her warning.

"It mun ha' bin she," she said, doggedly; "it wur the new squire safe eno', he and Muss Mary be allus side by side, beant they?"



“Kitty”—Mrs. Wolferston spoke almost as severely as Janet; she disliked asking questions about her own child, and yet she wanted to fathom Kitty’s knowledge, and to close her mouth towards others—“you cannot know much about Miss Mary since you have been shut up here.”

“At your pleasure, Madam Wolferston; but what I said to her I say to you without fear nor favour. He beant the man I’d let my girl choose for a husband. He be come of a bad father and a bad mother, and he be likely to come to a bad end heself.”

“Hush, hush, Kitty! You must not speak against your new master. Miss Mary is far too young to think of marriage, and you should not couple her name with her cousin’s. Pray don’t say anything more about it.”

Kitty went down to the housekeeper's room to get her tea, wagging her old head in protest against the madam's blindness. Meantime, Mr. Painson was hurrying along the Waverley avenue to overtake the lovers. He did not reach them till they had got to the end. They had been too deep in talk to hear his approach till he was close to them.

Mr. Painson was a very incurious old gentleman sometimes, although, when need required it, he could be as observant as a hawk. He saw Mary's flushed face as she turned round, and he thought she and her cousin had quarrelled.

He gave her her mother's message.

"I thought I should find you with Mr. Richard," he added, "and if I were you, Miss Mary, I would go to mamma at once,



for she seemed ready to faint when I left her."

The truth flashed upon Mary ; she looked imploringly at Richard.

" I dare not go," she whispered, " unless you tell me what to say."

Mr. Painson looked from one to the other. He had noticed during this week that they were often together, and although personally he did not care much about Richard Wolferston, he had settled in his own mind that his dear late friend's widow was a wiser woman than he took her for, and meant to make the best she could out of a bad business, by her youngest daughter's marriage with the new owner of Rookstone.

Richard's brows contracted ; he took Mary's hand and drew it through his arm.

“My cousin has promised to become my wife, Mr. Painson, and she fears that her mother is too much taken up with Janet to sympathise with her.”

Mary’s blushes deepened. This was not the truth, and yet she feared to contradict Richard.

Mr. Painson smiled gravely.

“Young ladies are always diffident,” he said ; “but if I were Miss Mary I shouldn’t keep the matter from my mother.”

“She has no intention of doing so ; we are simply waiting until Mrs. Wolferston’s anxiety for Janet is ended.”

Richard spoke very haughtily, and the old lawyer felt all his former doubt and dislike rekindle.

“I should say that is quite over,” he

said, coldly ; “ they are going to London this day week.”

He bade them farewell, and went away—troubled—he scarcely knew why. It seemed to him that Mary was too young for Richard Wolferston ; but girls of seventeen often marry men of five-and-thirty ; and then Mr. Painson found he was late for his train, and forgot all else.

Mary had paid daily visits to her sister since she began to mend, but the subject of Richard Wolferston had been mutually avoided. Each time she had felt guilty and ill at ease. Richard had told her not to speak of anything that had passed between them until he gave her leave to do so, but she had been unhappy in this concealment.


“ You are silly to be so frightened, my

darling," he said, when Mr. Painson turned away. "Why should your mother object to our engagement? for remember, Mary, it is a solemn engagement, which you cannot set aside without breaking your word."

"I don't want to set it aside," she said, sadly; "but oh, Richard, if you knew what it is to have to confess to mamma that I have deceived her, you would have some pity."

"You have not deceived her," he said, smiling: "I advised you to keep this from her because of her present anxiety; it would have been very selfish to tease her with it when Janet was so ill; don't tell her now unless you like—only that old chatterbox is sure to do it."

"If she does not know it already I need not tell her then, but you will tell her, won't



you, Richard? I do so want her to know, although I dread telling her myself."

"Little coward," he said, fondly, "one would fancy your mother an ogress."

Mary knew the true reason of her fears—she had never told Richard of her mother's warning, she feared it might stir up strife between them; but it was this disobedience that rankled so sorely.

When she entered the dressing-room she saw that all was discovered.

Kitty Robbins's knowing smile would have been enough, but her mother's sad pale face crushed away all the courage left in the young girl.

"You can go into my bedroom, Kitty, and shut the door," said Mrs. Wolferston.

It might have been better for Mary if

her mother had seen her alone. Janet was the first to speak :—

“Mary, how could you do it? Is it possible that you have been spending all your time with Richard Wolferston?”

Mary’s spirit roused. Before her mother could interpose, she answered her sister haughtily.

“Let me speak, Janet,” Mrs. Wolferston said, so sadly, that Mary’s pride melted. “Mary, I only ask you to be perfectly honest and candid. I have left you too much to yourself during this week, and I am therefore partly to blame. Has Richard been your companion often?”

Under Janet’s stern, reproving eyes, Mary would not soften outwardly.

“Yes,—we have been together every day.”

“ But did I not warn you, Mary ?”

For a moment the sad thrill in her mother's voice had almost conquered ; but there is no nature so stubborn as a weak one at bay. Richard's words, “ You are the only friend I have — no one understands me,” came back to harden her.

“ You warned me, mamma, because you think Richard very different from what he really is ; please not to speak against him to me, I have promised not to listen, and I cannot : you can separate me from him, of course, but nothing can ever change my feelings to him now.”

She stood erect, her feet firmly pressed on the floor, resolved that nothing should move or conquer her.

There was a pause, and then her mother

looked at Janet, who lay back exhausted on her sofa. "Come with me into your own room, Mary; Janet is not strong enough to bear discussion at present."

Mary followed silently, while her mother walked slowly along the gallery, utterly confused by this new mood in her youngest daughter. Mary had been fretful and wayward when thwarted, never stubborn. Her mother prayed earnestly to be guided rightly; it seemed to her impossible that in so short a time matters could have gone far enough to engage Mary's affections irretrievably. If she had known the hours spent in those few days in that heart-to-heart communion which binds people more closely than months of casual visits, she might have given up hope.

"Mary, you must answer me one ques-

tion. Did you tell Richard I wished you to avoid him ?”

“No.”

“I hoped you would have done this.”

“It would have been useless. It would only have made him angry with you.”

A flush came into Mrs. Wolferston’s face. “I would rather endure his anger than your disobedience,” she said.

“Mamma !” — her passion burst from Mary at last ; she clasped both hands together and then flung them out wildly towards her mother — “how can you be so cruel to me ? do you think I have not struggled ? Do you think I have been happy all this while ? I did avoid Richard at first, and that only made him own his love for me. I cannot tell you what I feel, mother ; it would be impossible. I will

never hide anything from you again. I have promised to be Richard's wife, but only with your consent."

She flung her arms round her mother, and hid her face on her shoulder, but her caresses were not returned. This cruel blow had come too suddenly to be at once received with resignation. The yielding her daughter up to such a man as her cousin seemed impossible to Mrs. Wolferston. She forgave Mary her deceit more readily than her obstinacy. "At least I may ask this of you," she said, when both had remained silent for a time; "during the rest of our stay at Rookstone promise me, Mary, only to see Richard with my leave and in my presence!"

Mary hesitated. She was willing, in the repentance her mother's sad face was

fast awakening, to make some atonement for the sorrow she had caused, but she feared Richard's anger. "Then let me stay up here with Janet," she said ; "if I go down again, I dare not refuse Richard anything he asks me."

Her mother sighed. It had come to this already ! Would any length of absence wear out his influence ? And then, when she remembered the wonderful fascination of his manner, she grew hopeful, and thought that perhaps at Mary's age the old proverb, "Out of sight out of mind," might be realised.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DRESSING-ROOM WINDOWS.

IT was a weary time for Mary.

For the first few days Richard was left without any explanation, to vent his anger and discontent as he liked. Christy had gone on a visit to Mrs. Webb until the moving was over, and, all things considered, he was well out of the way, for his cousin was by no means in an amiable humour.

He was angry with Mary for submitting

to this imprisonment, as he termed it; furious with Mrs. Wolferston for daring to oppose him openly—he had not given her credit for so much courage, and he was therefore surprised when, on the evening of the fourth day, he found her waiting for him in the saloon. He bowed to her, and was passing out, on to the terrace.

“I want to speak to you,” she said, quietly; “can you spare me a few minutes?”


He sat down. At that moment he almost hated Mrs. Wolferston.

“I dare say you have guessed that Mary has told me what has happened, and I must tell you frankly that after the assurance you gave me, I was surprised and grieved to hear what had passed between you and her.”

He smiled : he was not afraid of Mrs. Wolferston's influence with Mary, and he was resolved that she should not irritate him.

"I gave you that assurance when I asked you to remain here as mistress, Mrs. Wolferston ; but"—and he smiled with the winning sweetness which always made him hard to resist—"why will you harden yourself against me and against what I believe to be inevitable ? You may find a better husband for Mary, but you will not find any one who will make her happier. We love each other truly. Surely you wish your child's happiness ?" he said, earnestly.

Every word he uttered told her his power, and if *she* felt it, what hope could she cherish of freeing Mary from its influence.



It was difficult to believe that those dark, soft eyes, looking so earnestly into hers, had been all aflame with hate and anger only an hour ago.

Mrs. Wolferston scarcely knew how to answer him. Had she been too harsh in her judgment?—and might not this marriage prove—as her husband had said—the means of reforming Richard? But then, again, she felt sorely troubled—she knew so little of Richard Wolferston.


“I wish Mary’s happiness most earnestly,” she said, at last; “but, even at the risk of annoying you, I must speak openly. You and I take different views of happiness—I would choose her happiness in the next world rather than in this.”

He sneered—he could not help it—and Mrs. Wolferston saw that he did so.

"Let me finish," she said. "I do not presume to judge you or any one, but my daughter has been accustomed to outward observances, which I believe to be essential to her through her whole life; you think nothing of these things, you would probably teach her that they are valueless; I cannot willingly give her up to such teaching; this is my objection to you, and, besides this, I feel that you have been scarcely generous to take advantage of her extreme youth and inexperience."

He got up and walked the length of the room before he answered. He was puzzled; he had judged Mrs. Wolferston from a wrong standard. He had not thought she would have spoken so frankly.

"After all," he said, at last, "you must not be hard on me. Remember what



Mary is, and how dearly I love her. Besides, the old proverb says, 'All's fair in love.' I do not press for a speedy marriage, and I promise you at once that I will never interfere with her religious notions. If you continue to keep us apart, you will make us both very unhappy with no good result. Mary will not break her promise."

Mrs. Wolferston knew this already, and her perplexity increased to positive torture. The burden of widowhood was indeed heavy now.


"I separate you most unwillingly," she said, so sadly that even Richard could not disbelieve. "But think how young Mary is, she is only seventeen. In a year you may no longer wish to make her your wife; remember how short a time you have

known her. A year of separation will test you both, and will give me a better security, so far as regards her, against the danger I dread."

A year! Why, these four days had nearly killed him. No, he would not, and could not endure it. But Mrs. Wolferston found his anger far easier to resist than his entreaties, and finally he submitted, on condition that he was to have one farewell interview in her mother's presence before Mary left Rookstone.

Then he bade Mrs. Wolferston a hasty and rather sullen good night, and went down the terrace steps into the park.

He had made an immense effort at self-control, and now his anger passed all bounds. He hurried across the park with long swinging strides. He reached the



lake, but he passed round it and climbed the rising ground on the other side. The trees had been thinned out to give a good view of the house from this spot, and Richard flung himself down on the grass. There was still light enough to make out the windows. Mary's room he knew was on the other side, but she was probably with Janet, and those three windows exactly opposite to him represented the length of Mrs. Wolferston's rooms.

A year! he would not endure it. Wild ideas of inducing Mary to consent to a private marriage, of carrying her off whether she consented or not, crossed his excited brain; and yet he felt sure that Mary would not marry without her mother's blessing. One moment he laughed at such folly, and the next he half owned to him-

self that he should respect her the more for her firmness.

The darkness grew fast, the surface of the lake dulled from the silver shimmer which had reflected the trees so clearly, lights began to twinkle over the distant house, but Richard Wolferston still lay on the grass above the lake, at war with himself and all the world.

At last he had found a pure, innocent girl who loved him truly, in whose love he might have the happiness of peace and rest ; for, like most men who have had to struggle for existence, Richard fancied that he longed for rest—blind to the fact that the excitement engendered by necessity had become a real source of enjoyment.

“ I do not pretend to goodness,” he said ;

“what is it but a pretence at which the best player reaps the best reward ? but if I had Mary for a wife, I think I should feel more liking and sympathy for my fellow-creatures. She seems to send all harsh and discordant thoughts away, she—but why do I say ‘if?’—she shall be my wife. I have had no ‘ifs’ in my life as yet ; no man has who knows how to seize on opportunity and make her his fortune, instead of making for himself a life-long regret by his unready hesitation. Her mother urges her youth. Bah !”—he shrugged his shoulders with the foreign action inherited from his mother—“As if the cares of life being thrust on her so young—such cares, too, as I shall allow to burden her—could weigh down and crush her bright youth as much as this cruel barbarous separation. I can fancy

her there, boxed up with that precocious prude Janet, heavy-eyed and heavy-hearted, poor little darling, perhaps just now crying bitterly over this precious covenant her mother has forced on me."

In his renewed anger at having been conquered by a woman, he sprang to his feet, still keeping his eyes fixed on the house, now only a dark shapeless mass, blent with the surrounding foliage, dotted here and there with spots of light. As he gazed, a quick exclamation escaped him.

At the corner occupied by Mrs. Wolferston's three windows, there came a sudden brighter light, then one of the windows showed out plainly as if filled with flame.

Almost before he had time to grasp the thought, the flame had spread on to the

next window in a broad red glare that told its nature with fearful truth.

Richard Wolferston did not stay to see what came next. His wonderful self-possession helped him now. The keeper's lodge was much nearer to him than the house, and he almost flew there; he roused Jem Robbins, who was already snoring, bade him ride like the wind to Staplecross for the parish engine, and then he turned and ran at full speed himself to the house.

He found a group of female servants on the lawn, gazing up at the blazing corner of the building. The house was very old, and the flames were spreading rapidly among the dry joists and beams. "Where are Miss Mary and her mother?" he cried.

The women pointed to the saloon. As he reached the window he met the butler.

“We can’t get the garden hose to reach so high, sir, and water’s scarce.”

In an instant Richard’s eagerness was gone, and he was calm and collected. “Make all the women help you, Simpson, and form a chain to the lake; there is plenty of water there.”

But he had caught sight of Mary’s white dress within the saloon, and the next moment he was beside her.

CHAPTER XIV.

FAREWELL TO ROOKSTONE.

MRS. WOLFERSTON stood by her daughter, trying to calm her agitation. Even in that exciting moment Richard Wolferston saw how deathly white she looked, but he only glanced at her, and then lifted Mary in his arms. "Come," he said to her mother, "you are not safe here. Look ; the smoke is bursting through the ceiling already."

Mrs. Wolferston sprang after him and

clasped his arm. "Janet! will you save Janet? The staircase is still safe. I have only just left it. I brought Mary down first; she dared not venture alone. The servants are wild with terror, only you can help me."

She turned to re-enter the hall, but Richard held her back firmly. He replaced Mary in her chair.

"Look!" he said.

He opened the door just a little; the smoke rushed in with blinding force. "No one dare trust the staircase now; follow me at once."

He took up Mary again, and seemingly deaf to Mrs. Wolferston's agonised entreaties, he caught her hand and dragged her after him. As they passed down the steps he saw the men bringing ladders, and

heard a cry of inquiry for Kitty. All the servants had thought Miss Janet safe with her mother in the saloon, but no one had troubled about Kitty Robbins. He laid Mary on the grass. She had fainted with terror.

“Will you save Janet?” said Mrs. Wolferston.

“Do you see those windows one sheet of flame?” said Richard, sternly.

“Yes, yes! that is where she is.”

“And you ask me to plunge in there and rescue your daughter at the risk of my life—”

“Oh, don’t lose time. Yes, yes, anything!” she cried, in her almost frenzied anxiety.

“If I bring Janet to you safe will you give me Mary for my wife?”

“Go, go. I will give you anything you

ask," she said. She pushed him away in frantic terror for her child's safety.

He sprang up the steps at a bound. Two men had nearly reached the windows, but they were driven back by the smoke. Richard caught the last man by the collar and pulled him from the rung on which he still stood, trying to get breath for another attempt.

"Now, my men, with a will," he shouted, "there's less flame at this fourth window ; move it there."

The men obeyed with the rapidity that a strong will always exacts in moments of danger, and almost before it was steadied, Richard had sprung up the ladder, and had disappeared in the gulf of black smoke above. Till now all had been eager-tongued excitement. A deep, dead stillness suc-

ceeded. The anxious crowd below held its breath in the fearful expectation.

Mrs. Wolferston stood a little way apart, her hands clasped, her whole soul poured out in fervent prayer that her darling might yet be spared. How slowly time passed !

The flames grew fiercer, and were spreading rapidly along the upper part of the house. The heat was so intense that only the men who held the ladder dared remain on the terrace. Through the black rolling masses tongues of flames leaped out, and then pyramids of sparks fell down, messengers to tell the havoc enacted within.

Mrs. Wolferston's agony grew more than she could bear. She sank on her knees and covered her eyes with her hands. A loud cry from those near her, and she looked up. There was no one on the lad-

der ; its top was hidden by flames that wreathed themselves round it as completely as the smoke had done when Richard disappeared into it ; but something must have happened to cause this excitement. She started to her feet.

The terrace was in broad light now, and Richard Wolferston was hurrying along it with one woman in his arms, and dragging another by the hand.

He placed the half-stifed girl beside Mary.

“ You had better look to her,” he said simply to Mrs. Wolferston, “ and to the poor old woman, too, who has behaved bravely. If she had not guided us to the back staircase, which is stone, you know, we should not be here.”

“ God bless you ! how can I ever thank you ?”

But he was on the terrace again, eager now that anxiety for life was over, to stop the further progress of the flames.

He could do but little. The water, thrown on in small quantities, seemed rather to refresh the hungry leaping flames, and give them new power to dart on their prey.

The engine came at last, but by that time the fire had become so extended that it was not easily extinguished. About a third of the house was ruined, and much of the remaining portion seriously damaged.

Even Richard Wolferston agreed that it was better that the widow and her daughters should remove to their new home without delay, and next afternoon they bade a sad farewell to Rookstone—black-

ened, broken, defiled—no longer the dear home so cherished and so full of sacred memories.

It was a sad leave-taking, and Mrs. Wolferston shortened it as much as possible.

Richard helped her into the carriage.

“God bless you!” she said, earnestly. It was the first allusion that had been made to Janet’s rescue, for he had scarcely seen her since the night before, and the words brought the whole scene back vividly.

He smiled, and pressed her hand in both his own. “I do not hold you to your promise. I asked it when I was beside myself at the thought of separation from Mary, but my own nature is too free to accept an extorted gift. I throw myself entirely on your mercy.”

He spoke in so low a voice that only Mrs. Wolferston heard him.

Before she could answer, he had signed to the coachman to drive on.

CHAPTER XV.

NO PROOFS.

“**M**R. PAINSON, ma’am,” said the maid ; “but he says unless you are quite well enough to see him, he will call again when your mamma is at home.”

“Ask him to come in,” answered Janet. “I am quite well enough to see an old friend.”

She spoke almost eagerly ; she seemed afraid he would go away before the maid reached him.

Mr. Painson came in trying to smile, as if there were no change from the luxurious elegance of the saloon at Rookstone to the small villa drawing-room in which he now found Janet. But when he saw how thin and pale she looked, her deep mourning making this still more apparent, he fairly broke down in an attempt at a joke.

The room was pretty. Simply furnished, it yet had that nameless taste and elegance in its arrangements which the very presence of some inhabitants creates. It is their atmosphere, and it moves about with them ; while in larger, more costly dwellings it is nowhere to be found, or seen only in some isolated object, makes all the rest still less attractive.

A flower-table, full of graceful ferns, stood near Janet's sofa, and Mr. Painson

sighed as he looked at it. He remembered having seen it at Rookstone.

“You must not do that,” she said, cheerfully. “I know and understand all your kind feelings for us, dear Mr. Painson, but I believe we ought firmly to resolve against regrets, unless, indeed”—she stopped, and then, meeting his sharp inquiring glance, she blushed and went on hurriedly—“mamma has taken Mary out for a drive. Mrs. Dawson very kindly sent her carriage, and such an offer is not one to throw away now, is it?”

Again Mr. Painson could not check a sigh, but he uttered no regrets; he inquired for Mrs. Wolferston’s health.

Janet thought her mother better than could have been expected after the variety of emotions and trials she had undergone.

"But then, you know my dear mother's life is so bound up in that of others, that I believe, in her anxiety first for me and then for Mary, she has given no heed to her own sufferings."

"Is Miss Mary ill, then?" he asked, anxiously.

Janet looked perplexed. "I am sorry I said anything," she said. "I fancied my mother had consulted you. Mr. Painson, will you let me think a minute?"

She rested one cheek on her slender, upturned hand, and sat with bent head. The old lawyer looked at her, wondering how anyone could prefer her sister in Janet's presence.

Mary was taller, larger in every way; she was certainly handsomer than Janet; but it was the soul breathing out of Janet's

every feature with sparkling truth and intelligence that to him eclipsed all the softer, more material charms of her young sister.

Presently Janet looked up. "You can scarcely fancy how old I feel," she said, sadly. "I seem to have thought more during the last fortnight than through the whole course of my life. Till now I have consulted my mother. It seems to me that I am grown too old to lean on her, when she has no prop to sustain her. Do not mistake me ; it is in no trust in my own power for self-guidance, I say this ; it is simply to spare her any little burden of the heavy load she must bear alone. Well," she went on abruptly, "there are things I cannot settle for myself, and in which I feel a man's judgment would help

me greatly. If—if Captain Wenlock were in England, I should consult him, but I do not know when I may see him now.”

Mr. Painson did not answer her at once ; he sat thinking what an exceedingly injudicious adviser a hot-headed young man like Henry Wenlock would be in Janet’s present position. Men above fifty are slow to acknowledge the merit of their brethren under thirty years of age.

“You have known me ever since I was a baby, Mr. Painson, and”—she smiled frankly up in his face—“I cannot remember that you ever refused me anything. Will you listen to me now ? I have a horrible idea which is wearing me to death, which I believe caused my illness. I dare not burden my mother with it, and yet if

I do not get some advice, it will either drive me mad or kill me."

She clasped her hands nervously, and such a heart-wrung look came into her face that he no longer wondered at her wasted appearance.

"I wish you had told me this long ago," he said. "Remember, Miss Janet, for the rest of your life, there is nothing so dangerous for a woman to keep to herself as a secret: she cannot bear the weight of it. Now, what is this trouble of yours?"

He spoke gently, and bent his head on one side, as if he were encouraging a timid child to confidence.

"Did you ever think—did it ever come into your head to doubt the genuineness of my father's will?"

He started, not slightly, but in positive

fear of what her next words might be. To this man of the world, so trained in all its ways and maxims, it was terrible to speak out a plain unvarnished suspicion.

“My dear young lady,” he said, “I will hear all you have to communicate before I answer; but, remember, we cannot be too cautious in speaking of others.”

Janet smiled almost bitterly. “I have been cautious,” she said, “or I should not have waited till to-day to utter my doubts. From the first, my feeling has been that my father never made that will — that in fact it is a fabrication of Richard Wolferston’s!”

He had stretched his hands out to her in deprecation of those last words, which he felt were coming, but she would speak them, and then she sat still, relieved by

this confession, but in breathless anxiety for his answer.

To her surprise, he smiled when he began to speak. "Well, you know, my dear young lady, such things have happened before ; and they have happened, we may say, I think, without meaning any offence, especially in cases where the relative who stepped into the property was the family adviser—privately, you know, Miss Janet, we are talking privately now—relatives as advisers are a mistake—a great mistake"—he fidgetted with a ring on his little finger.

"Then you think my suspicion justifiable?" she said, eagerly.

He drew his features together, and looked at her through his half-shut eyes.

"I said nothing of the kind in your case, I was merely stating a fact which, in

my legal capacity, caused me to examine the document in question cautiously, and—and, well, Miss Janet, this is perfectly *entre nous*, I suppose—I went so far as to test the signatures, and found them perfectly genuine. No, there is no flaw in that will; the only question I could find to hang my hat on was your father's state of mind when he executed it, and that your poor dear mother won't hear a word against."

"Then, in your opinion, I may dismiss this suspicion at once as unjust and groundless?"

"Certainly, I should say so; dear me—" he said, irritably, "what else can you do? if a thing can't be proved there's an end of it."

Then, without giving her time to speak,

he went back to the question which Janet had purposely left unanswered.

“ Did you say that your sister was ill ? ”

Janet looked perplexed again. “ I thought you knew that she had engaged herself to Richard at Rookstone, Well,” for Mr. Painson nodded, “ on the night of the fire my mother promised to consent to their marriage, and although Richard afterwards released her from this promise, she considers herself bound by it.”

“ You don’t mean to say your mother had anything to say against such a marriage for Miss Mary ? Really, really,” said the lawyer, in such a state of nervous irritation that he fidgetted from head to foot, “ she must have lost her senses ! ”

Janet was silent. She was offended with Mr. Painson for blaming her mother, and

thoroughly overwhelmed by his assurance of Richard Wolferston's innocence.

"My dear child," he said, "husbands don't grow ready made now-a-days; we must take 'em as we find them, and it will be a thousand pities if anything should occur to prevent your cousin from marrying Miss Mary. If I'd seen mamma I should have told her so. I really hope, Miss Janet, if there is any prejudice at work you'll do your best to remove it. Dear me! dear me! Miss Mary mayn't have such another first-rate chance of settling while she lives."

He shook hands and went away, determined, if he saw Richard Wolferston, not to lose a chance of bringing the lovers together again. His feelings had not changed towards the new squire of Rook-

stone—he disliked him quite as much as ever. He shrank from his cynical sarcastic words, and his indifferent supercilious manner—for Richard took no pains to conciliate him ; but this marriage with Mary was, in Mr. Painson's eyes, a pure question of worldly advantage to the whole family—the only means, in fact, which would enable the Wolferstons to maintain their former position and connections ; and position and connections were among the gods of Mr. Painson's worship.

And while he walked quietly back to his office in one of those quaint deserted streets leading down to what used to be the silent highway of the noblemen and gentlemen of London—streets in which are the remains of houses that tell how society has migrated westward since the days when nobles made the Strand their dwelling-

place—Janet sat trying to realise the truth of his assurances. Before Mr. Painson she had controlled both surprise and agitation, but now she could do this no longer.

The will genuine ! the will which she had looked on only as a means of temporarily depriving them of their happy home—of all that was so justly theirs. During her illness she had solemnly vowed to devote the remainder of her life, if it were needed, to unravel the mystery of her brother's disinheritance; and must she yield all this up, must she give up the hope of ever again seeing her darling mother the rightful mistress of Rookstone ? And Richard ? Since he had saved her life, her task had seemed harder, but she had not flinched from it.

Almost as soon as they were settled in

their new home, she had spoken very strongly to Mary on the subject of her engagement, and had assured her that no blessing could rest on an attachment formed in opposition to her mother's wishes. Mary had reproached her for her own ingratitude to Richard ; but the earnest warning, solemnly spoken by her sister, had troubled the young girl's peace, and Mary had told her mother that for the present she preferred not to see her cousin, and alleged Janet's warning as her reason.

Mrs. Wolferston was surprised. She could not understand Janet's strange persistence in her dislike to the marriage, for at her age it was not likely that the objections which weighed with herself against Richard could equally influence

her eldest daughter. She even felt pained by Janet's ingratitude, and she told her so.

The girl had borne these reproaches silently, so long as they were unproven. She had resolved not to utter her suspicions against Richard to anyone except Mr. Painson, and now, after what he had said, she did not know how to act. It seemed as if the whole tenour of her conduct must change. She must retract her own words, unsay her own arguments, and yet without daring to give any reason for such seeming waywardness; for if Richard Wolferston married Mary, how could she ever tell even her mother the horrible guilt of which she had suspected him?

She tried to thank God for relieving her mind from the dark, dreadful doubt that had

oppressed her, but she felt no comfort or relief in this thanksgiving; her words seemed to roll back on herself, confusing and depressing her. She told herself that he was cleared from all suspicion, and yet, deep down in her heart, hiding away, doubt lingered—doubt which influenced her, even though as yet she was not aware of its existence.

“Oh, if Henry would only come back,” she said, “I should have some one to help me combat this miserable perplexity; and yet why am I so weak? Probably I shall never see him again. Why do I not at once try to bear my own burden, instead of wishing to lay it on others?”

The servant came in with letters; one of them bore a foreign postmark. It was from Captain Wenlock. Instead of return-

ing to England, his regiment had been ordered up the country for a year, so the letter addressed to him at Malta would probably never reach his hands, and he was still ignorant of all that had happened at Rookstone.

Poor Janet! it was a very hard trial. Three months at least she must still wait before she knew the effect which the change in her fortunes would work in her lover's affections.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. DAWSON'S INVITATION.

BEFORE Janet slept that night, she asked her sister to forgive her, as she felt that she had given way to unjust prejudice in speaking of Richard Wolferston, and she hoped Mary would suffer nothing she had said to influence her.

To her surprise, Mary burst into tears. "You are so cruel," she sobbed; "why not leave me in peace? You first advise me

one way and then the other, until I seem not to know what is right or wrong. If Richard really cared for me he would not have released mamma from her promise. Between you all, I am made perfectly miserable."

There was no use in combating a mood like this ; but next morning Janet repeated nearly the same words to her mother, and told her also how strongly Mr. Painson advised the marriage.

Mrs. Wolferston sighed. "I thought I was acting for the best in opposing it," she said ; "but it seems to me that this marriage is to be, and, therefore, of course, I may not set my own will against it. It is a relief to me that you no longer dislike it, Janet, for I must own that since the night of the fire my feelings towards Richard have

undergone a complete change, and it pained me to see your aversion."

Janet blushed, she could not confess the truth. "Did dear papa know of Richard's attachment?" she asked.

"Yes"—her mother spoke thoughtfully—"it seems to me that the knowledge of his own intentions towards Richard made your dear father encourage his visits to Rookstone lately. I see now that he must have planned this marriage from the first."

"Then, mamma," said Janet, impulsively, "ought you not to see his wishes fulfilled as soon as possible? Ought we not to invite Richard to come and see us?"

"At present Mary shrinks from seeing him. There is no hurry, Janet," Mrs. Wolferston smiled; "I believe it is always best to leave lovers to settle their own

affairs. I wish I had thought this sooner."

Before Janet could answer, Mrs. Dawson was announced. She was a round, comely looking lady, between fifty and sixty, with sparkling dark eyes, a good set of teeth, and a profusion of small, iron-grey ringlets which wagged a sort of accompaniment to her frequent bursts of laughter.

The sight of Mrs. Wolferston subdued her liveliness to a minor key. "How are you to-day, poor dear? Enjoyed the drive yesterday? That's right. Famous thing a drive for getting spirits up; nothing like it; but it's not you I've come to see—no, nor you either, you poor, pale-faced Janet. Mustn't tell her so, must we?"—this in apology to Mrs. Wolferston. "That was a slip of the tongue, was it not? Where's

the naughty beauty, as I call her? My visit is to her." Janet went in search of her sister.

"Just a little private talk you know, dear; Janet will not be coming back, will she?" Mrs. Dawson edged her chair confidentially close to her nephew's widow.

"I don't know," spoken coldly, for Aunt Dawson's mysteries were not always to Mrs. Wolferston's taste.

"Oh, if she does, invent some excuse or other to get rid of her. Can't you say she had better lie down a little? I am sure she looks pale enough."

"No"—Mrs. Wolferston smiled in spite of herself—"I would rather tell her you want to tell me something privately."

"Oh, no. Why, my dear Amy, you, a mother of two daughters!—really, I must

say, even an old maid like myself knows better than that."

"I scarcely understand you."

"No, I daresay not, poor thing. You see it is all so sudden and recent, and I'm no doubt premature, and that—only opportunities may come and go, and once gone can't be had back. You understand exactly, I've no doubt, and see the force of things just as I do, so wise you always were, you poor bereaved one."

The "poor bereaved one" looked thoroughly mystified, but she was not to be enlightened directly.

"Ah, here's the beauty," and Aunt Dawson jumped up nimbly, and advanced to meet Mary as she came in. "Now, Miss Careless, guess what I have got for you."

Mary was not in the saucy spirits her aunt expected. "I don't know, aunt," she said, simply.

"You'll be losing your head next, or your heart, I shouldn't wonder. Now, look here. I wonder who is the owner of this pretty thing!"

She was fumbling in a capacious pocket, so full of miscellaneous articles, that a struggle was inevitable when any one of them had to be extricated. If the sharp-eyed old lady had not been thus occupied, she must have seen how deeply Mary blushed.

"My ear-ring! Oh, where was it found?"

"Ah, only suppose now you had been in a hired fly. I wonder what chance there would have been of your ear-ring coming

home again. I have heard"—she dropped her voice to its tone of mystery—"that some of those fly-drivers make large fortunes just by what people drop. But now, Amy, I really do want you to listen seriously. It's a most important communication, I assure you, dear. Mary's not of the least consequence, because you see she's not a party concerned; but I think you and I must put our wits together a bit and just see that the Rookstone property don't quite slip out of the family."

"But, Mrs. Dawson—"

"Now, my dear, I know what you are going to say as well as if you were a bee in a glass hive. You object to match-making, of course, dear, and very right and proper too, as long as you had a roof over your head, and your thousands to spend and

squander. I don't mean any reflections by 'squander,' as you know, my dear Amy; but words come crooked when one feels as strongly as I do now."

She might have added, "and speaks as fast," for in her excitement ideas flowed so rapidly that she had not words enough to express them, and they came tumbling out in strange incoherent fashion.

"Now, you know, Amy, Janet's quite marriageable, quite—now, don't shake your dear head, it's the greatest mistake in the world your consenting to her wasting all the best of her youth in a desert, pining after a wild young officer like Henry Wenlock. Who's to say he is not married by this time? And, my dear, when one reads in the papers of breaches of promise for far less provocation than poor misguided Chris-

topher's will, it seems to me that you should cut the Gordian knot yourself. Write and give him up, and so make an opening for Richard Wolferston."

"But, putting every other consideration aside, Richard Wolferston would never think of marrying Janet."

It was the first pause Mrs. Dawson had come to, and it happened more from want of breath than because she had nearly developed her ideas.

"Ah, you see," she said, triumphantly, the iron-grey ringlets dancing with delight, "I should not have come here to-day, dear Amy, rousing you from the memory of the dear departed, for whom I'm sure no one can have a more sincere and hearty respect than myself; I shouldn't have dreamed of coming here to state a theory; you thought

so now, did you not? Ah, no, my dear, I could not, at such a time, oh, no. The fact is, between ourselves"—here she stretched out her short fat neck till her face nearly touched Mrs. Wolferston's, and jerked out each word with deliberate emphasis—"I saw my gentleman this morning; ascertained his intentions or affections, or whatever men call the thing they wear under their waistcoats, and fancy it's a heart; and if you'll only leave the matter in my hands, Amy dear, I'll undertake to have these young people married and settled before I'm six months older."

"Who are you speaking of, Aunt Dawson?"

"Patience, child; how you startled me, speaking in that solemn, serious way, and how strangely you look. I declare you

gave me quite a turn, Mary. Well, you mustn't go and repeat it to Janet, you know, for of course Richard will like to tell his own story best; but of course you knew all about it long ago. Ah, I thought so; why, my dear Amy, it is not likely that a man would go rushing into roaring raging flames as he did, to save a mere indifferent life like anybody else's—you couldn't expect me to believe such a thing. But now look here. Couldn't you let me take Janet back with me? Richard has promised to dine with me to-morrow. Now have I not arranged a pleasant little surprise for him? I'd have taken Janet off then and now, without a word to discompose her mind, only it struck me it might be as well to *cong  * that tiresome, hot-headed young Wenlock first, and let her

start fair with Richard. Don't you think I was right, Amy dear?"

Mrs. Wolferston could not answer ; but for the distress in Mary's face, she must have laughed at the good-natured busybody's mistake. The best course to pursue now was to dismiss her before Mary betrayed herself.

"Thank you," she said, "I am sure you mean kindly, but Janet is deeply attached to Henry Wenlock ; and even if he releases her from her engagement, she is not likely to marry any one else. Besides this, I feel sure neither she nor her sister would think of visiting at present."

Mrs. Dawson was vehement in her protest against this decision ; but she knew of old that, gentle as "dear Amy" was, she could be firm also, and she was obliged to go away alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

SETTLED IN HASTE.

DIRECTLY Mrs. Dawson had departed, her mother turned to Mary.

“Of course, my dear child, your aunt has made a mistake, and has arrived at an entirely wrong conclusion about Richard.”

“I cannot agree with you.”

The decided words, the abrupt manner, were quite unlike spoiled, petted Mary.

“But, Mary—”

“Mamma, it is useless, the foreboding of

him soon, mother, she must—how
help it?—and then it seems to me
to them both.”

Wolferston soothed and reasoned,
an : at last she persuaded the sob-
happy girl to lie down on a sofa,
went to find her eldest daughter.

“If you had sent for me at once,”
she said, when she heard her mother’s

“I would have cross-questioned
Wolferston until I had found out the

The tears sprang to her eyes.

as if every day brings some
cause of estrangement ; till lately,

so happy together, and
to be left alone with

last matter I believe silence is
course,” said Mrs. Wolferston ;

this has been upon me ever since we left Rookstone. He loved me once—I know that well, I can never forget it; but oh, mamma, mamma, I lost his love”—she hid her face on her mother’s shoulder, and broke down in violent sobs—“on the night of the fire. He saw the difference between us—you know what a helpless baby I was, and I lost my senses quite at last, and Kitty told me that, until the smoke almost choked her, Janet was so brave and calm—it was my cowardice that killed his love; and I suppose, saving her as he did, drew him to Janet. Now do you see why he gave me up? Oh, so many things have come clear to me in these few minutes: now I know why Janet has grown so suddenly kind about him; she does not love him, but she cannot hate a man who loves her, and she

will love him soon, mother, she must—how can she help it?—and then it seems to me I must hate them both.”

Mrs. Wolferston soothed and reasoned, but in vain : at last she persuaded the sobbing, unhappy girl to lie down on a sofa, and then went to find her eldest daughter.

“ I wish you had sent for me at once,” Janet said, when she heard her mother’s tidings. “ I would have cross-questioned Aunt Dawson until I had found out the truth.” The tears sprang to her eyes. “ It seems as if every day brings some fresh cause of estrangement ; till lately, Mary and I were so happy together, and now I dread to be left alone with her.”

“ In this last matter I believe silence is your best course,” said Mrs. Wolferston ;

“perhaps if we both treat it with entire indifference, Mary may take the same view of the case ; she is too much excited just now to judge at all.”

“Poor girl, she has had unhappiness enough,” said Janet, warmly. “Mamma, will you let me write to Richard ? I have never yet thanked him for saving my life ; surely I may ask him to come here and let me thank him personally.”

Her mother smiled. “I begin to think you are imitating Aunt Dawson,” she said ; “but do as you like, my darling ; I believe only Richard himself can calm Mary now.”

Janet wrote, and then she sat counting the hours that must pass before Richard could make his appearance. She tried to cast all doubts and fears away, to tell her-

self that the marriage was ordained to be, and that, therefore, neither human right nor might could avail to prevent it; but she could not feel tranquil. The step she had just taken was not a mere resigning herself to the ways of Providence; instead of this she had resolved on hastening Mary's happiness in her own way henceforth. Come what might of the marriage, humanly speaking, her act had rendered it inevitable.

She did not speak of Henry Wenlock's letter. It seemed to Janet that already her mother's sacred grief had been intruded on by care for others; she ought now to be allowed to give herself up to the seclusion of her own thoughts and memories; and for this reason also she wrote to Mrs. Webb, asking her to keep Christy a

week or two longer—till they should be settled in their Brompton home.

There was a small garden attached, the sort of garden one finds to all new villa houses, which answers well enough for those who can replenish the flower-beds as fast as gas and smoke empty them, but which bears as much comparison to a real flower garden as an ordinary young lady of fashion fresh from the milliner's hands does to a beautiful Roman peasant girl in her festal costume. A London garden destroys all sentiment ; you look in vain for the plants of last year ; you had grown fond of them in your efforts to tend and increase their growth ; you find only new comers, like the "Veneerings," your neighbours and the shining furniture you see over the way. If you care for old association—links to the past—avoid an

“improving London suburb,” where the very walks and green-lanes dear to your childhood grow into streets with high-sounding titles ; where all is artificial, simplicity and freshness vanish with the daisies and buttercups.

Janet was in this garden examining some of the plants they had brought with them when Richard arrived. They had only just breakfasted, and she had not expected him so early. For the moment she felt really glad to see him, and she told him so.

He was touched by the change in her manner.

“Where is Mary ? how is she ?” he asked.

“We shall find her in-doors.” She did not tell him how unprepared her sister was to see him. Janet’s fear had been that Mary would refuse to meet her cousin or

manage in some way to avoid him. The street door was open, and she went in quickly, followed by Richard.

Mary was sitting alone in the little morning-room, her head resting on her hands. She coloured when she saw who was Janet's companion, and looked resentfully at her sister.

She made no sign of greeting, and Richard looked at Janet in surprise.

She smiled. "Mary is not well or happy," she said, rather mischievously, "but I think she will be better now"—and Janet went away thinking that Richard would find it easy enough to convince her sister of her mistake.

But it was not an easy matter to get her to listen at all. At first she begged him to excuse her, to let her leave the room. She

wished for the future only to see him when her mother or Janet was present, and when she found he would not listen, she sought refuge in silence.

“Now, Mary, my sweet child,”—he took both her hands and held them fast in his —“what have I done to deserve such a reception? Is this your love for me? I believe you are not in earnest, you are only trying some of your old saucy tricks on me.”

But when he drew her nearer to him, the real sorrow in her eyes showed him she was in earnest.

He tried to soothe her and win her confidence by gentleness. She relapsed into a sort of forced indifference which tried his patience, and his anger rose. He let go her hands, and walked up and down the room.

“Mary,” he said, “you are determined to try me, to see the worst of me, or you would not use your power over me in *this* way. I have been living on the thought of your sweetness and your love, feeling as if I could not live without you. I *came* here as soon as I got Janet’s letter ; it seemed to me a new life had begun, and you receive me as if I had committed a crime.” He stood facing her, stern and pale with anger, and Mary grew terrified. “You have promised to be my wife, and till I release you from that promise you are mine,” he said roughly, taking her hand again in his strong firm clasp, “and you are bound to tell me who has been making mischief between us ; I insist on knowing ; is it your mother ?”

He had touched the right string. She

might not have yielded to fear for herself, although she was really afraid of him now, but it would be dreadful for her mother to be frightened by his violence; and, like many another woman, spite of his anger, Mary loved him the better for compelling her obedience. She told him Mrs. Dawson's story. His brow cleared as if by magic; he laughed, and then, as if that were his best assurance of truth to her, he drew Mary to his heart and kissed her.

"You are a darling little goose," he said, "and Mrs. Dawson is more silly than I thought her. It would serve you rightly, you naughty child, if I were really to transfer my love to Janet, don't you think so?"

"I don't know," she sobbed, "I feel as

if you must love her best ; she is so good and wise, and I am so silly."

"And do you think I should like a wise or clever woman for my wife, Mary ; a woman who would lecture and preach against everything not quite right in her eyes ? My wife must be mine entirely, her thoughts, her opinions, her wishes, must be mine too. I am a dreadful tyrant, my pet ; but I believe you will be the most loving, docile darling a man ever took to himself for his own."

There was almost a fierce earnestness in his words, and she trembled. A vague faint memory of her mother's warning, that in marrying Richard she would yield up her notions of right and wrong, as well as her love, to his guidance, fell across the purple light of love which a minute before

had seemed to penetrate every sensation ; but under the spell of his eyes, listening to the fascination of his words, she could neither think nor remember distinctly—he was her idol, her all ; and when a little while after he whispered that the only way to make his happiness sure would be a speedy marriage, Mary forgot her mother's grief, her own deep mourning, and let him take her consent for granted.

He asked to see Mrs. Wolferston. She looked pained when he told her that only her consent was wanting now to the celebration of their marriage. The wedding should be as quiet and private as she pleased, but he hoped she would allow it to take place immediately.

“ I think this haste is cruel,” she said ;
“ why not wait till Mary is a year older ?

you shall see her as often and with as little restraint as you wish."

He entreated and argued, and Mrs. Wolferston already found it difficult to refuse him, when, to her surprise, she found Janet ranked on his side.

She had joined Mary when Richard left her, had gathered the purpose of his errand to her mother, and deciding in her usual firm way, had come to the conclusion that her mother would have no quiet or seclusion as long as these lovers' quarrels were likely to recur. Janet only lived for her mother now. She was angry with Mary for being able to think of marrying at such a time of mourning; "but if she can do so already," thought the elder sister, "she will always be fretting and discontented unless Richard is here, and all this will

worry our darling mother. They had better be married at once."

"At once," according to Janet, meant in three months' time, a period which, Richard's persuasions curtailed to two. He did not leave the house till Mrs. Wolferston had promised that the marriage should take place that day two months.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RETURN HOME.

A YEAR passed slowly away. The monotony of Mrs. Wolferston's and Janet's life was only interrupted by Mary's letters, full of her fresh and delighted experience of foreign travel. Directly after the marriage Richard had taken his young wife to Italy, and they had lingered there month after month, although Mr. Painson was continually urging on the new squire the importance of making himself thoroughly

well known and popular among his tenantry.

Till the wedding was over Mrs. Wolferston had borne up so wonderfully, that even good-natured Mrs. Dawson had shaken her head, and thought that poor dear Amy had less feeling than she had given her credit for,—nay, in a burst of confidence to Mrs. Webb, she had even hinted that she was afraid old Painson was looking after the widow already, and that his attentions did much to keep up her spirits. But the good soul only chattered thoughtlessly, and felt sorry for her outpourings when she got home, after the fashion of impulsive females, while Mrs. Webb felt a calm satisfaction in repeating a slander not invented by herself. But before a week had passed, time, the usual

avenger of injustice, had silenced Mrs. Webb.

Mrs. Wolferston was seriously ill, and the London physician whom Janet insisted on calling in to consult with Mrs. Dawson's doctor, declared that only care and time could restore her, and even then she must be very tenderly dealt with. The anguish she had so bravely struggled against had brought to light or life inward weakness, and he said that although there was no actual disease of the heart at present, there was that which made it imperative that Mrs. Wolferston should be spared any fatigue or sudden emotion.

Janet did not write this news to Mary. The young girl's aim in the life she had planned for herself was to bear her own burdens alone—a good plan enough for a fretful complaining woman, but one which

has its evils in such a nature as Janet's. She grew silent, and less and less communicative in her replies to Mary's bright amusing letters ; confidence was gradually diminishing between the sisters, and it was Janet's fault. To her mother and little Christy she was all they could wish, but this constant effort at self-reliance had made her years older.

She softened when at length an answer came to her letter to Henry Wenlock.

“What matters loss of money,” he wrote, after many expressions of sympathy for her sorrow, “to people who love each other as you and I do, my own Janet? I shall be in England, I hope, next September ; then I shall sell my commission, and get some more profitable employment, and

your good kind mother will give you to me as soon as I have made a home for you."

Captain Wenlock would have wondered if he could have seen the burst of tears his letter evoked, but these brought comfort and solace to the overburdened spirit. It was not for always, then, that she should have to walk thus alone and unaided. In a few months she should have Henry to look to for guidance and sympathy, but she could not marry him while her mother lived—her desolate mother, who had only her to rest on now.

Mary had told Mrs. Wolferston that she hoped to become a mother early in October; it was now August, and still they did not return to England.

But one morning, soon after the begin-

ning of the month, Janet came into her mother's sitting-room with her hands full of letters. She was laughing, and seemed unusually animated.

"Mother, what will you give me for my news?" she said, half fearing lest its suddenness might bring on one of the fainting fits her mother had lately suffered from. "It is very surprising but very pleasant, but the outside of the letters will tell their own story. Here is one from Mary, with a Geneva postmark; this one is from Richard, dated Paris; and now, where do you think this comes from?"

"Are they indeed at Rookstone? Ah! Janet, I can scarcely tell you how thankful I am for dear Mary's sake."

"Yes, they reached Rookstone two days ago, and that is not all; Mary wants you

to go to her at once ; but, mother, if you have any shrinking from this visit, I can easily take your place."

But Mrs. Wolferston was eager to go herself. In the joy of seeing her darling again after this long separation she forgot the pain all the old memories would suffer in this sudden rekindling.

Janet felt secretly indignant that Richard should have taken her sister home without staying even one day in London with her mother, but when she hinted this, Mrs. Wolferston said it was gratifying to her to see his anxiety that Mary should be spared fatigue.

"Why, you see, dear, he has even written this last note himself to save her trouble."

Janet did not answer ; she thought it

would have been more natural for Mary to have written and to have included herself and Christy in the invitation, but she had resolved not to harbour evil thoughts of Richard, and she went upstairs to pack her mother's trunk, as Mrs. Wolferston was asked to go to Rookstone as soon as possible.

She had grown so much stronger during the last few months that even Janet felt no anxiety in allowing her to make the journey only accompanied by a maid.

Richard Wolferston met his mother-in-law at the railway station; he looked much older; she thought his face had grown lined and anxious.

"I thought Mary had better meet you indoors," he said; "the idea of your visit has made her rather hysterical," and then

so grave, almost stern a look, came into his face, that Mrs. Wolferston felt an uneasy restraint creep over her.

As they approached Rookstone she sank back in the carriage and drew her thick veil more closely over her face. She had not been outside the gates between that eventful night and the day of her departure, and every hedge-bank, every well-known group of trees, gave a fresh pang to the still keen sense of bereavement.

Here were the sprigs of wild clematis he had gathered for her to draw, or in their early married days had wreathed round her hat; there were the cottages his liberal hand had restored from decay; here the peep of distant country they had so often admired together; and here—ah! here, indeed—was a poignant remembrance, the

toll-house, where on that sad night doubt had grown so strong—the doubt of her husband's safety. All the events of that night came back to her with terrible reality ; all her bitter anguish was renewed.

Richard turned to her abruptly. “I dare say Mary will tell you I wanted your visit deferred ; the truth is, of course, I am very anxious about Mary, and I was afraid this first coming back would depress and agitate you ; and frankly, it will annoy me greatly if my wife is in any way upset.”

His tone was not unkind, but still she could not help shrinking from his words ; even her gentle spirit roused to wonder why Richard should imagine her less careful of her daughter than he was of his wife.

“But it is only his great love for her,” she said to herself; “surely I should not complain of that, and he could not know how sad I am.”

They were driving in at the great gates, not the entrance by which we saw Richard Wolferston go in more than a year ago. These gates were on the other side of the park, much nearer the house. Mrs. Wolferston looked towards the house. Could this be Mary standing on the steps? a beautiful woman dressed in the latest fashion, her hair so frizzled out of any resemblance to nature, that her mother could hardly think it was her own.

She laughed and cried and was so excited that Mrs. Wolferston could scarcely quiet her: in her heart she felt thankful that Richard had left them together, he

would, certainly, have thought that her presence agitated Mary.

But after a little the girl's old bright saucy self came back, and she was nestling her head on her mother's shoulder, kissing and petting her as if she were still a child.

"You will find the house so changed," she said ; "I have not grown used to it yet ; all our own sleeping-rooms have been rebuilt, and they are not a bit like the old ones. Will you like to see the room I have chosen for you ? it is close to my own."

Mary rang the bell. Mrs. Wolferston looked in hopes to see a familiar face ; she had remarked that the servants she had already seen were strangers, but a moustached foreigner answered Mary's summons.

“Send Eulalie.”

“Is your maid French?” her mother asked.

“Oh yes, Richard prefers foreign servants; he says they are so much quicker-witted; so that, except coachmen, grooms, and housemaids, we have nothing but French and German people about us.”

Mrs. Wolferston had resolved not to volunteer an unasked opinion on any changes she might observe, but there was something in this thorough break-up of old associations which deeply pained her. Most of the Rookstone servants had been there for years. It was a hard return for faithful service.

In some ways, perhaps, it was less trying that her new rooms did not remind her of the past; this was no longer her Rookstone,

and when she came down to dinner she felt like a visitor in a strange house.

Richard was courteous, but his cold watchful manner threw a constraint over everything. Mrs. Wolferston longed for dinner to be over to find herself once more alone with Mary, but this was not to be.

To her surprise he followed them almost immediately into the saloon. Nothing was changed here, even the new squire's fastidious taste had seen no need of alteration.

He came up to Mary.

"I thought your mother would like a stroll in the park ; there is still some light left. What do you think of it ?"

Mrs. Wolferston was in hopes her daughter would have elected to remain

indoors, but Richard's slightest wish was law to his wife, and she seemed to think there was no doubt of her mother's acquiescence.

They strolled down to the terrace steps, where the peacocks, all unconscious of any change of masters, strutted about, only thinking of themselves. At the edge of the lake, Richard was turning to the right so as to climb the higher ground on the other side, which commanded a view of the house, when Mrs. Wolferston stopped.

"I should like to see Kitty Robbins," she said ; "I suppose she is still at the lodge?"

A dark shadow crossed Richard's face, and Mary looked frightened and nervous.

"Oh, never mind, dear mamma, going to see Kitty now, she is such a nasty, cross old thing, and—"

“Mary”—she checked herself suddenly at the sound of her husband’s voice—“*you* are not going to see Mrs. Robbins; why do you interfere with your mother’s wishes? why should she not go if she pleases?”

Mrs. Wolferston looked from one to the other; she felt certain that Richard had forbidden his wife to hold any communication with the faithful old dependant, and her spirit rose against what seemed to her tyranny.

“I’ll go alone, Mary,” she said. “I think poor old Kitty will feel hurt if I do not pay her an early visit.”

“Very well,” Richard Wolferston answered, “we will wait for you here; you will not be long, I dare say?”

It seemed as if he implied “you must

not," spite of the courteous tone in which the words were spoken.

Mrs. Wolferston turned towards Kitty's cottage. The dark fears which at one time had influenced her so strongly against Richard Wolferston came back with overwhelming force. The bright, happy tone of Mary's letters had effectually quieted any remains that lingered of these fears, and the sunshine in Mary's face had confirmed her mother's belief that Richard had proved a tender, indulgent husband, for she knew her daughter could not be happy unless she were petted and treated lovingly. But something in his tone startled her; it was more like that of a master to an unreasoning child, and yet it seemed not to pain or perplex Mary. Why was she not allowed to visit old Kitty?

For a moment Mrs. Wolferston had nearly turned back and asked her daughter to go with her.

“But I resolved not to stir up strife between them,” she said, “and I believe he would refuse to let her accompany me.”

CHAPTER XIX.

KITTY'S WARNING.

THE light had faded quickly, and when Mrs. Wolferston stooped to enter the low cottage door the room was in darkness, except for the smouldering log on the hearth.

Seeing a visitor, but not making out who it was, Kitty got up briskly and struck at the half-burned wood. The sparks flew out in all directions ; then, stooping down, the old woman took a few shavings from a

heap in the corner, and in a moment, as if by magic, the little room was filled with bright, ruddy light.

The red glare flickered over Kitty's face as she turned sideways to peer at her visitor. She looked something like what we fancy the old witch of a fairy story ; but a gleam of hearty, unfeigned delight, such as no witch's face ever glowed with, spread over hers when she recognised her visitor.

“ Well, to be sure ! Be it ee'self as is come back, this is a sight ! Jem he said summat on't ; but him be a rare gawk at news, and I just bid he hold his idle talk. Will 'ee please sit ye down, Madam Wolferston ? Ah ! it wur a sad day for Rookstone when ye left it. Have 'ee brought Master Christy to see t'old place ? ”

“No ; I came alone. My daughter, Mrs. Wolferston, is not well enough to bear the fatigue of much company.”

Kitty groaned. “Not well, beant her ? An’ no wonder ; what call has her to look for health or welfare either, I’d like to know, flyin’ in the face of a solemn warnin’ !”

Mrs. Wolferston looked puzzled. She felt inclined to check Kitty ; and yet the old woman’s manner was too earnest not to be impressive. Kitty grew more and more excited as she went on :

“I warned she as if her wur my own child. I telled she yon squoire were naught for a ’ooman to trust to ; and Mary beant a ’ooman, she be naught but a un-grown gal. More’s the pity for ’ee, Madam Wolferston, she be so untamed like ; for

thay do tell I 'ee never liked the match, but thay young folk wur too strong for 'ee. Bless us, I knaw what thay sort o' gals be : easy enough to drive when thay be coupled, but as hard-mouthed as colts when thay be single. He'll knaw how to guide she, let him be for that."

"You have been misinformed, Kitty." Mrs. Wolferston spoke very coldly ; she thought the conversation better ended. "I was quite willing that my daughter should marry Mr. Wolferston."

A cry of astonishment burst from Kitty before her visitor had finished speaking. "Eh, but I ha' heerd o' witchcraft and other tomfooleries, an' I put 'em aside for idle talk. I a'most think there be summat o' that in Richard Wolferston, or he'd not ha' glamoured the mother as well as the darter.

Nobut yeeself," she went on, slowly shaking her head, "would ha' made I believe a quiet, sober, godly lady, as 'ee be, Madam Wolferston, would uphold such awful ways and practices as goes on at Rookstone now."

"Well, Kitty, I came to see you, and to hear about your rheumatism and Jem ; but if you can only find fault with Mr. Wolferston I must go away."

Mrs. Wolferston rose as she spoke. The old woman's words had increased the dark fears and forebodings Richard had re-awakened ; but it was impossible to listen to any gossip about Rookstone.

To her surprise, Kitty laid her hand on her arm.

"Dwoant 'ee bring Master Christy here, then," she spoke in a shrill, eager voice. "May be him 'ull get tainted wi' all thay

new-fangled nossiuns — no prayers, no church-gwoing. Oh, Madam Wolferston, ye may have changed; tho' I can't credit such a falling away. But what would the dear squoire heself say—him as wur so right-minded — to see a lot o' cursin' Frenchmen and drinkin' German chaps, drivin' the whole village wild with thay doins?"

"It can be no business of yours or mine." Mrs. Wolferston was much moved by the old woman's earnestness, although she strove not to show it. "Remember, Kitty, that they have only been home a fortnight, and have not got into regular ways yet. Now I must say good night, for it grows dark."

"Well, madam, I means naut but good by what I says" — Kitty opened the

door reluctantly—"there be thay as won't see and thay as can't! thay as natur blinds and thay as blinds thayselfes. But one word I will speak, tho' all the world wur strivin' to keep my mouth shut. I beant one of thay sort as dumbs my tongue when it ought to be waggin'. Yon squoire's a dark man, wi' more bad in he than good. I don't say what the bad be—I hanna found out; but he has doin's with t' evil one; an' he'd not a' nourished bad blood agen an old creetur like I, if I hadna somehow hit the right nail on the head in what I said to Miss Mary. Look ye here, Madam Wolferston. The real squoire, him as was kind by young and old alike, never meant to cast his little fair-headed boy on the world without a home over his head; nor you neither. I know I'm only a stupid old

'ooman, may be as sour as a crab, some folks say ; but I beant a shiftless 'ooman as leaves her work unfinished. My life, may be, wonna last long enough, but while it lasts I beant a gwain to rest till I ha' made out summat more about yon Richard Wolferston than he gives out. He's more than one story hid under that black head o' hisn."

"Good night, Kitty, I must go ;" and Mrs. Wolferston hurried away, too much disturbed and bewildered for any settled thought till she rejoined Mary, and then her daughter's smiling, happy face seemed to give a decided negative to Kitty's dark warnings.

She felt pained when, coming down early next morning, she was told by the bearded Frenchman, who seemed to act as majordomo, that there would be no use in wait-

ing breakfast ; monsieur and madame always took coffee in their rooms.

Mary appeared about eleven o'clock, full of apologies ; she had got into bad habits abroad, she said, but she hoped to do better ; and then, seemingly afraid of this topic, she flew off like a bird to all sorts of desultory talk, and won her mother to listen, though her heart was aching at what she felt was a want of confidence between them.

Sunday came next day, and Mary's maid tapped at Mrs. Wolferston's door soon after breakfast.

"Would madame wish the carriage to go to church in?"

"No, thank you, unless your mistress usually drives to church."

The Frenchwoman shook her head.

Madame did not go to church, but she

had thought that her mamma would find the walk much too fatiguing.

Mrs. Wolferston repeated that she preferred walking, and the smart maid departed.

Never went to church! But this was probably a hazarded assertion—the maid perhaps had not been long in their service: this was only Mary's third Sunday in England; she might have felt ill or tired.

But these excuses brought no comfort, and there was something in the warm greeting Mrs. Wolferston met with after service was over, from the clergyman and his flock, which made her aware that faces from the park were rare in the village.

She went back to Rookstone sad and anxious. Janet she knew would have spoken out her thoughts and remonstrated

with her sister, but her mother hesitated. Richard had specially told her that his wife was delicate and easily agitated, and it seemed impossible to open such a subject without giving Mary some amount of pain, and this Mrs. Wolferston, in her tender longing not to alienate the child who seemed so anxious for her affection, could not make up her mind to give.

Should she speak to Richard? She did not know why, whether from the effect of Kitty's words, or from the restraint his formal, courteous manner had created, but Mrs. Wolferston became suddenly aware, when she asked herself this question, that she had grown afraid of her son-in-law; she noticed, too, how seldom he left her alone with Mary.

He might be capable of separating them

entirely if she interfered with his opinions ; and yet was a mother to give up all right of influence over so young a girl as Mary, knowing as she did the utter incapacity of her husband to help her in these ways ? And Mary was about to become a mother ! Mrs. Wolferston had heard that those who give up appointed public ordinances are apt to fall into careless ways about private ones. A prayerless mother ! this idea was terrible, and when she at length slept, her night was disturbed and restless.

She awaked with that strange sense of impending misfortune we all know so well ; Kitty's words came back much more vividly. She knew Kitty to be a clever, energetic, and persevering woman. It was terrible to think that she would henceforth be a perpetual spy on Mary's husband, and Mrs.

Wolferston could not hide from herself the conviction that probably in his life in California there had been episodes which Richard might wish to remain unknown. The hints about the will had not troubled her. She always clung to the remembrance of that interrupted conversation with her husband as a safeguard against doubts or murmurs. He had thought Richard's father unjustly disinherited, and he had resolved that Christy should not entail a curse on himself by possessing what was rightfully the property of another man.

But the arrival of the post entirely changed the current of her thoughts. Janet wrote that Henry Wenlock might be expected any day, and although she did not ask her mother to shorten her visit, Mrs. Wolferston felt how much com-

fort her sympathy would be to Janet in these anxious days of expectation.

When Mary came downstairs her mother told her Janet's news.

"I believe, my dear child, I ought to go home at once; poor girl, she has no one but me to share her joy with."

Mary burst into passionate weeping; her mother tried to calm her, but it was useless.

"You don't love me. Oh! I am sure you do not; no one loves me but Richard," she sobbed, "and he will not love me long, for I have teased him and made him angry; I know why you are going, you think me so wicked because I try to obey and please my husband; but, mother, it is cruel of you to punish me for this."

“ But, Mary, what have I said or done that is cruel ?”

“ I know,” she said, “ I was watching you the first evening ; I begged him so hard before you came just to let things be as they used to be, and he said it would be acting a falsehood, and he would not have shams in his house ; he is so true and noble, mother, he could not ; and when I begged him hard, he went away angrily, and said I was hysterical ; and, mamma, mamma, I know if I were to try and please you by going to church and all that, not only it would make unhappiness between him and me, but he would never let me see you again.”

A slight flush came into her mother's face.

“ I think and hope you wrong your hus-

band, Mary, but if you feel yourself that you have acted wrongly in giving up these things, surely you are in great peril; we have nowhere a warrant to let human love or human duty come between us and that which we feel to be necessary to us. I am not speaking to you as I might speak; I am not urging you to disobey your husband, if it is indeed possible that he has forbidden you a religious mode of life, but I only tell you to listen attentively to the fears and misgivings which I can see beset you; they are not idle scruples, my darling."

But Mary's agitation had become uncontrollable; it seemed as if something in her mother's words had moved her beyond endurance. One hysterical fit

succeeded another, and Mrs. Wolferston was growing seriously alarmed, when Richard came abruptly into the room.

CHAPTER XX.

SQUIRE CHRISTOPHER'S STUDY.

RICHARD WOLFERSTON looked sternly at his mother-in-law and then at Mary, but he did not speak.

"Ah, Richard!" his wife sobbed, "mamma is going away from me already."

"How can you be such a baby?" he said, coldly; "I thought the post must have brought some very distressing news," he glanced at the letter on the table. "Surely

you don't wish to force your mother to stay against her will."

His words had a magical effect on Mary, but the tone jarred Mrs. Wolferston ; she looked up at him ; there was that cold, cynical sneer on his face which had at first alienated her from him.

"Willingness is not in question," she said, "but I find we may daily expect Captain Wenlock's arrival, and I think I ought to be with Janet."

"I am the last person who would willingly interfere with your notions of duty," he spoke with such studied politeness that it seemed to Mrs. Wolferston he was really angry, but she feared to agitate Mary by any explanation.

Mary had dried her eyes, and sat quiet and subdued till her husband asked her to

execute some commission which obliged her to leave the room. Both mother and daughter felt that he did this on purpose, and as their eyes met, the glance of suppressed alarm in each made them strangely alike.

But Mrs. Wolferston's fear was only momentary ; she rose to follow Mary.

Richard had turned away to the window, but he knew of her movement instantly.

"I want you to look here, if you will be so good, Mrs. Wolferston," he said, quietly, without so much as a glance towards her ; "you know the value of those oak-trees as well as I do, and Painson wants to persuade me to cut them down."

He spoke with that unruffled calm which always gives its owner an advan-

tage over more impulsive, sensitive natures.

Instead of following Mary, she came and stood beside him.

His forced manner left him at once ; he kept her there talking for half-an-hour about the park and the trees, Captain Wenlock and his prospects, till she almost felt towards him as she had felt during the days of his short engagement to Mary, when he had won her to look upon him with real affection and confidence.

Suddenly he broke off the conversation.

“ I forget if you said when you would like the carriage to take you to the station.”

“ I had not specified any time, I was just settling my departure when you came in, but I have no wish to leave Mary abruptly.”

“ You are always unselfish, I know,” he smiled, “ but whenever you go the poor child will feel it sadly ; will it not be better to make one business of it and return to town this afternoon ? I will order the carriage to be ready to meet the four o'clock train.”

He left the room before she could answer, and Mrs. Wolferston felt greatly bewildered. His manner had been frank and kind, winning even, and yet there was something so decided in his proposal, something which she felt herself so powerless to resist, that it was difficult to believe he had not snatched at a pretext for separating her from Mary.

A sudden fear came upon her as she remembered his harshly spoken warning on her way to Rookstone. Was he going

to punish her for the agitation which he had witnessed in his wife, and to separate them for ever? And as the idea mastered her, with almost a wild terror she resolved to see Mary at once, and if she found her urgent for her stay, to remain at Rookstone a few days longer. If Richard's manner had been truthful, if he really liked her as much as he had implied, he could have no wish to hasten her departure.

She knocked at the door of Mary's room; there was no answer, and when she knocked again, Richard himself opened it.

"You want Mary?" he said, in a low voice. "I have persuaded her to lie down in her dressing-room. I have told her as gently as possible that you are going to

town this afternoon ; I did this to save you another scene, but, as I suspected, she had imagined that you intended to leave Rookstone to-day, and I think she is ashamed of having so distressed you."

His words were gently and smilingly spoken, and yet they fell like a stone on the hope which had been struggling with all Mrs. Wolferston's dark doubts and fears. As he closed the door and she passed along the gallery, she felt half tempted to go into the dressing-room and see whether Mary was kept there against her will. It was only a momentary thought. Had she not resolved never to stir up strife between the husband and wife ? Mary belonged more to Richard than to herself now ; it was bitter to yield her child up to his guidance, but what

could she do ? Open remonstrance to him respecting his opinions would, she felt certain, ensure the separation she so greatly dreaded. All she could trust to was the influence affection gave her over Mary, and prayer, that a better, higher life than the mere earthly existence they seemed to lead at present might yet be in store for her erring children.

Mary came down into the saloon only a little while before her mother's departure ; her husband followed almost directly.

She looked as if she had been crying, but she was calm and composed, even when she said good-bye ; the strained clasp in which she held her mother alone told how deeply she felt this parting.

Her husband drew her hand into his arm and led her back into the

saloon before the carriage was out of sight.

“That is brave and good,” and he kissed her.

But she did not answer ; for the first time since their marriage he felt that she received his praise and his tenderness passively, almost with coldness.

At another moment his strong power of self-control would have enabled him to appear unconscious, but self-reproach usually makes a man irritable, and Mrs. Wolferston’s sad yearning eyes, as they took their last look at Mary, haunted him.

“What is the matter now ?” he spoke so sternly that his wife started. “Really my patience begins to wear out : one minute I find you in an agony of sobs

and tears at the bare idea of losing your mother, and when I try to comfort you for her loss you repulse me."

"Oh! Richard," and then the facile, easily-moved nature broke down, its momentary anger melting in tears.

She did not know what was the matter with her : it seemed as if all her happiness had gone. She had behaved foolishly to her mother, and now she had made her darling husband angry—all this came in little bursts of penitent misery between her sobs—finally, she believed it would be much better if she died, and then Richard would be free and be able to marry a really good wife and be happy.

For a moment the cloud left her husband's face.

"Come, come," he said, pettingly, "you

are in a hurry to settle matters ; we won't talk about a new wife till I'm tired of you, my pet ; but I think, for the future, you will be more inclined to be guided by me than by your own inclinations."

These last words were gravely spoken, and he rose from the couch beside her and stood while she answered—

"I don't know what you mean. I thought you always guided me."

He seemed uneasy ; he took a turn up and down the room before he spoke again.

"Your memory is worse than I thought it. I can hardly think you have forgotten the answer I made you when you urged me to let you ask your mother to Rookstone."

"I remember that, of course, but I don't

see what it has had to do with my unhappiness."

He threw his head back with a quick, impatient movement.

"I should have thought it needed no application. I told you that a mother-in-law always breeds quarrels in a household, not from any fault, but from the natural jealousy she feels of her daughter's husband ; you would not believe me, and perhaps it is as well that I allowed you to convince yourself."

"But, Richard, it is an entire mistake. Mamma never said a word to me until I spoke to her, and then what she did say was only what my conscience tells me if I listen to its—"

"Conscience, Mary ! have I not told you that I detest cant of any sort ? And this

conscience of yours"—he laid a sneering emphasis on the word—"seems to me to be very one-sided in its tellings. You promised me that if I would consent to your mother's visit you would hold no conversation with her on this special subject, and yet you say you began it yourself. Does your 'conscience' tell nothing about disobedience to your husband?"

He looked fixedly at her ; to his surprise she sat quiet without showing any of the impulsive sorrow he had expected. He had thought himself so thoroughly master of this loving nature's moods that he felt as disconcerted as a showman feels when he pulls the wrong strings of a puppet.

Mary pressed her hands tightly together

before she spoke ; a half-bewildered, half-imploring look came into her face.

“ Oh, darling, I do not know ; it is all confusion again. While mamma talked to me, light seemed to come into my mind ; it was very painful ; it was more than I could bear, but I think it was the real truth ; it was as if I caught sight of things I have been hiding my eyes from ever since I left Rookstone, and it almost made me want to go back to the old life again ; and then comes the thought of marriage vows ; it must be right to love and obey you, Richard. Why did I feel, when you spoke just now, as if I should follow inclination and not duty in obeying you ?”

His face had grown very pale, and a nervous twitch about the mouth more than once betrayed a desire to interrupt her, but

he waited till she had finished—waited even when she sat there pale—with those soft imploring eyes raised to his.

She did not guess what a tempest she had raised. He almost trembled with passion when he found that all the subtle sophistries with which, aided by his real tenderness, he had lulled Mary's religious, or, as he called them, superstitious scruples to sleep had been swept away by a single conversation, and that deep down in his wife's heart the root of all this "folly and nonsense" was as firm as ever. If he had answered her in the heat of anger it might have been better for both, but he dared not; he felt that it was a crisis, and with all his tyranny he dreaded the power that his passionate love for his wife gave her over him; he must have time for thought.

“I will come back to you in a moment,” he said, and then he went into the room on the left, which had been the late squire’s study.

It was no one’s room now ; it had been left untouched since that sad evening, and there was something almost ghostly in the sight of that tall, high-backed wooden chair, placed in front of the davenport.

It was plain that Richard Wolferston thought so, for a perceptible shudder ran through him as he stood still in the middle of the room, his eyes strained on the chair as if he were striving to picture his lost cousin in his accustomed place. For a few minutes he stood spelled by the painful remembrance, then his eyes wandered listlessly over the room till they fixed themselves on the davenport : a start—a shock

of sudden remembrance—and he went hurriedly to it and tried all the drawers, one after another ; all were locked, but the key was in the top drawer on the right hand side ; he took this out and put it in his pocket.

“ I am glad I came here,” he said ; “ the sight of the place, hateful as it is, has brought me to my senses. Where would be the use of arguing with such a child, darling though she is ? I will take no further notice of her outbreak, but I think my saintly, interfering mother-in-law has paid her last visit to Rookstone.”

He turned quickly to the door ; as he reached it something seemed to occur to him ; he went back to the davenport, raised the lid of the desk, and placed the key of the drawer inside.

Then the same horror returned that had possessed him on his entrance ; he hurried to the study door, locked it on the outside, and put the key in his pocket.

END OF VOL. I.





